

INTERZONE #229

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PAUL EVANBY • ROCHITA LOENEN-RUIZ
TOBY LITT • JIM HAWKINS • ANTONY MANN

JEFF VANDERMEER on AMBERGRIS

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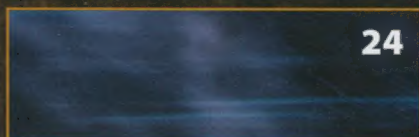
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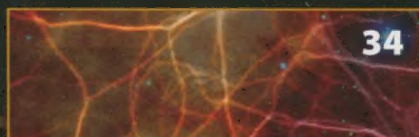
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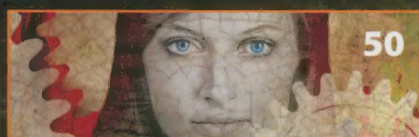
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EDITORIAL

ANSIBLE LINK DAVID LANGFORD



As mentioned last time, two *Interzone* stories were shortlisted for Nebulas. Jason Sanford's 'Sublimation Angels' (#224) eventually lost out in the novella category

but Eugie Foster's 'Sinner, Baker, Fabulist, Priest; Red Mask, Black Mask, Gentleman, Beast' (#220) won in the novelette category.

Meanwhile, the Association of Science Fiction & Fantasy Artists final ballot for this year's Chesley Awards includes, in the Best Cover Illustration (Magazine) category, Adam Tredowski's art for the #220 cover. The winners will be announced at the North American Science Fiction Convention to be held 5–8 August in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Announced at the same convention are the winners of the Sidewise Awards for Alternate History. One of the finalists in the Short Form category is Bruce Sterling's 'Black Swan' from #221.

The British Fantasy Society has announced the shortlists for the British Fantasy Awards, to be presented at FantasyCon in Nottingham, 17–19 September. David Langford's Ansible Link has been nominated in the Best Non-Fiction category, as has Peter Tennant's Case Notes from our sister magazine *Black Static*. Both *Interzone* and *Black Static* are nominated in the Best Magazine category, and publisher TTA Press is up for the Best Small Press award. No *Interzone* fiction contributions made the shortlist for Best Short Story, but Nina Allan (most recent *Interzone* appearance being 'Flying in the Face of God' in #227, with another story forthcoming, and another – 'Orinoco' – in the August issue of *Black Static*) did make the list with 'My Brother's Keeper' from *Black Static* #12.

Congratulations and good luck to everybody!

We hope you enjoy this issue (let us know on the Interaction forum) and will join us again for #230 in September. We have great new stories on file by Aliette de Bodard, Patrick Samphire, Dayle Dermatis, Lavie Tidhar and others, plus more of the usual news, views, interviews and art.

Queen's Birthday Honours: OBEs went to 1960s *Avengers* screenwriter and co-producer Brian Clemens, and to horror author James Herbert.

Neil Gaiman, who charges high speaking fees out of sheer self-defence, was not best pleased to become a 'political football' after accepting \$40,000 to talk at a Minnesota library. (Which needed to use up special funding that couldn't be spent otherwise.) All the money went to charity, but the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* decided this payment was shock horror front-page news.

As Others See Our Young. *Teenaged son:* 'I'm the only one of my friends who hasn't lost his virginity.' *Narrow-eyed mother:* 'We've seen your friends, and trust me, Pimples, Braces and Beam Me Up Scotty are not getting any.' (*Desperate Housewives*)

Awards.

Arthur C. Clarke: China Miéville, *The City and the City* – making him the first three-time winner.

BAFTA (TV): the only genre winner, for Drama Series, was the superpowers saga

Misfits.

Compton Crook (first novel): Paolo Bacigalupi, *The Windup Girl*.

Lambda (LGBT), sf/fantasy/horror category: Catherynne M. Valente, *Palimpsest*.

Nebula novel winner: Paolo Bacigalupi, *The Windup Girl*.

Unsolicited Shrug. A *Washington Post* article on books read by past US presidents led to a flood of suggestions for what President Obama should be reading. Top choice, after the Constitution and the Bible: Ayn Rand's massive sf saga *Atlas Shrugged*. 'He needs to read [it] at least ten times,' insisted one cruel taskmaster.

Diana Wynne Jones, after much consultation with her husband and specialists, decided to abandon chemotherapy (which is serving only to make her feel very ill indeed) and resign herself to whatever may follow. Her senior oncologist fears she has 'months rather than years,' but we all hope that – as once or twice before – Diana can still surprise the medical profession. May the good luck return.

R.I.P

Everett F. Bleiler (1920–2010), US editor, bibliographer, critic and translator who compiled the pioneering *The Checklist of Fantastic Literature* (1948), died on 13 June aged 90. Besides further important genre checklists, he edited the first regular *Year's Best SF* anthologies (1949–1956) with T.E. Dikty, and – while at Dover Publications, 1855–1977 – many notable anthologies and critical editions of fantasy writers.

John Birchby (1930–2010), long-time UK fan, the last 1940s White Horse attendee still a regular at London first-Thursdays meetings in 2010, died on 29 May; he was 79.

George Ewing (1945–2010), author of technical articles and a number of sf stories beginning with 'Black Fly' (1974 *Analog*), died on 18 May aged 64.

Frank Frazetta (1928–2010), legendary

US fantasy artist who after early work in pulps and comics rose to fame with film posters and (from the 1960s) book covers, died after a stroke on 10 May; he was 82. His best-known images were inspired by Robert E. Howard's Conan and various Edgar Rice Burroughs novels; he won the Hugo as best professional artist in 1966, the corresponding World Fantasy Award in 1976, WFA Life Achievement in 2001, and three Chesley Awards.

Martin Gardner (1914–2010), US polymath famed for his long-running 'Mathematical Games' column in *Scientific American* (collected in 15 volumes) and for many books attacking pseudoscience, died on 22 May. Gardner was 95 and still publishing new work. He contributed mathematical puzzles to *Asimov's* 1977–1986; his sf/fantasy stories are assembled in *The No-Sided Professor* (1987); he wrote extensively about favourite fantasy authors, especially L. Frank Baum, Lewis Carroll (see *The Annotated Alice* and *The Annotated Snark*),



> This column has been vetted by Interzone's crack legal staff

As Others See Us. George Nolfi, director of *The Adjustment Bureau*, explains that this film – though based ‘very loosely’ on Philip K. Dick’s sf story ‘Adjustment Team’ (1954) – is Not Science Fiction: ‘Sci-fi to me conjures up lasers and spaceships and time travel. This movie is told very realistically.’ (*Entertainment Weekly*)

Ian McEwan’s climate-change novel *Solar*

won the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse prize for comic fiction at the Hay Festival. He said: ‘I have been surprised there aren’t more novels [about it]. It’s clearly begun to have an impact on our lives already and it has huge human consequences, on a small scale, on a private level and on a geopolitical level.’ (*Guardian*) The *Guardian* could have cited heaps of past sf about climate change, from George Turner’s *The Sea and Summer*

G.K. Chesterton and Lord Dunsany.

Arthur Herzog (1927–2010), US author whose debut novel was *The Swarm* (giant killer bees, 1974) and who wrote several other sf disaster and dystopia books, died on 26 May; he was 83.

David Markson (1927–2010), US author of the surreal last-woman-on-Earth novel *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* (1988), died on 4 June aged 82.

Peter O’Donnell (1920–2010), UK comics writer and novelist who created Modesty Blaise – both as an *Evening Standard* comic strip (1963–2001) and as a novel sequence opening with *Modesty Blaise* (1965) – died on 3 May; he was 90. O’Donnell also contributed notable scripts to the science-fiction fantasy strip *Garth*.

Jeanne Robinson (1948–2010), dancer and choreographer, wife and collaborator of Spider Robinson, died on 30 May after

weeks of palliative care for no longer treatable cancer. Their 1977 *Analog* story ‘Stardance’ won both Hugo and Nebula awards, and grew into the novel *Stardance* (1979).

Alan Sillitoe (1928–2010), UK author of best-selling ‘kitchen-sink drama’ like *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958), died on 25 April aged 82; genre work includes the sf satire *Travels in Nihilon* (1971).

Randolph Stow (1935–2010), Australian-born author whose novels include the post-holocaust *Tourmaline* (1963) and the fantasy *The Girl Green as Elderflower* (1980), died on 30 May aged 74.

Sharon Webb (1936–2010), US author and nurse who based sf on her medical experience, died on 29 April aged 74. Her books include *The Adventures of Terra Tarkington* (1985) and the Earth Song trilogy.

(1987) to Kim Stanley Robinson’s ‘Science in the Capital’ trio (2005–7)...but the invisible genre stayed invisible.

Harlan Ellison astonished the sf world when his electronic publishers E-Reads announced ‘*Last Dangerous Visions*, for the first time ever in e-book format (and soon to be in paperback)...’ This proved to be a typo, since hastily fixed, for *Dangerous Visions* (1967).

Guillermo Del Toro dropped out as director of the two coming films of *The Hobbit*, but continues as screenplay co-writer.

Jane Yolen reports: ‘Someone asked a children’s book publisher recently at a panel what was the most popular trend in picture books these days. He thought carefully for a long moment, then said, “Pink and sparkly covers.” I think I shall go and drown myself forthwith.’

Thog’s Masterclass. *Crossing the Jordan Dept.* [With thanks to Adam Roberts, who quixotically tried to read/review the entire Wheel of Time sequence – one book per week.] ‘A weeping woman is a bucket with no bottom.’ (Robert Jordan, *The Shadow Rising*, 1992) ‘Never prod at a woman unless you must.’ ‘The only man completely at peace is a man without a navel.’ ‘Caution once forgotten could be forgotten once too often.’ ‘The best way to apologize to a man is to trip him in a secluded part of the garden.’ ‘You put your cat in your hat and stuff it down your breeches.’ (Robert Jordan, *Lord of Chaos*, 1994) ‘Suddenly he pressed the looking glass to his eye as a woman galloped a tall black horse.’ ‘Worry [...] ate inside him like a ferret trying to burrow out of his middle.’ ‘Perrin shut out the rest, no easy task, with his ears.’ ‘That old woman reminded Sevvanna of a landslide plunging down a mountain.’ ‘He sounded like a bumblebee the size of a cat instead of a mastiff.’ ‘The Ajas sent to the Keeper whatever dribbles from their own eyes-and-ears they were willing to share.’ (Robert Jordan, *A Crown of Swords*, 1994) ‘Her eyebrows climbed as she directed her gaze back to them, eyes black as her white-winged hair, a demanding stare of impatience so loud she might as well have shouted.’ (Robert Jordan, *The Path of Daggers*, 1998) ‘The tea had gone cold, but honey exploded on her tongue.’ ‘Loial’s ears trembled with caution, now.’ (Robert Jordan, *Crossroads of Twilight*, 2003)



PAUL EVANBY MANNIKIN

1776

July

THE SPERMATOOZON HAD ITS EYES CLOSED AND ITS ARMS WRAPPED around its legs. Kilian tapped a finger against the drawing. "You can see the umbilical cord, connected to the abdomen. Runs down between the little legs, turns into the animalculum's tail. The tail will attach itself to the lining of the womb, so the infinitesimal proto-child lies embedded and anchored securely. Sustained and nourished by the mother's fluids, it may then develop in peace."

Mister Olivier Oyen, the corpulent Company representative, straightened up but kept staring wide-eyed at the page. His coat betrayed the work of an expensive Amsterdam outfitter, and his white periwig gleamed in the light of the oil lamp standing next to the book. "And you really think..."

Kilian tried to hide his uneasiness by pretending to inspect the view from the window. To the north, in Orange Bay, the harbour of Saint Eustatius, he saw the lights of ships at anchor. He felt apprehensive. Sudden involvement of the Dutch West India Company tended to disturb the natural order of things – quite literally. "Hartsoecker's discovery was confirmed in 1699," he continued. "By Dalenpatius in the *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres*. He knew his business. Antonie van Leeuwenhoek was a rank amateur, compared to him." He stepped back and crossed his arms. "And my own observations are documented in my *Tractatus*. But you already knew that, apparently."

"Your treatise, yes," Oyen said, absentmindedly. "And...what about the rest? How are we coming along there?"

Kilian shrugged. "I am doing my utmost. But it's complicated and painstaking work. If I had an assistant..."

Oyen waved a pudgy hand and turned away. "I have passed your request on to mister De Graaff. But he is a busy man, and he wants to supervise selection of your assistant in person, to make certain you get the best one available."

Kilian nodded in silent resignation. Mister Johannes de Graaff was a busy man, and an ambitious one. The Secretary to the Government of Saint Eustatius had an eye on the post of island Commander. There were rumours that the present Commander was about to be dismissed because



of his too obvious support for the rebellious British colonies in North America. Mister De Graaff wanted to make certain everyone knew that the island of Statia was dear to his heart. And not just because he owned the largest plantation on it.

So he had sent mister Oyen to Kilian's door, with a job offer.

"You must understand," Oyen had said, after entering the study of Kilian's small house above Gallows Bay and eyeing its spartan furnishings critically, "that as the only free port of any significance, Statia is unique in the West Indies. We welcome everyone. The warehouses are filled to bursting, the plantations are productive, the harbour is always busy. We are the jewel in the crown of the Company."

Kilian poured wine. "I understand."

"But," Oyen resumed pompously, "if history has taught us anything, it is that no world power has claim to everlasting life. Our trade empire is strong, but we must make sure it remains so. We need to diversify."

Kilian lifted his glass. "Isn't Saint Eustatius quite diversified already? Sugar, cotton, indigo. Warehousing. Not to mention arms smuggling. And of course the slave trade, sadly."

A pained expression came over Oyen's face. "I'm afraid our best slave trading days are some forty years in the past. And almost every other island in these parts produces more sugar than we do. Really, the thing that makes us what we are is our status as a free port." He sat forward in his chair. "And that, sir, is politics. Granted, we can trade with everybody, because the Republic of the United Netherlands is neutral. But who knows when Their High Mightinesses in The Hague will decide to change course once again?" He took a sip of his wine. "We turn a tidy profit supplying arms to the North Americans. But that will not last. Either the rebels throw the Britons back into the ocean, or the Britons quash the rebellion. In both cases, we lose the arms trade."

"Or the Britons annex Statia."

Oyen grinned. "Well, I wouldn't worry about that. We're still allies, after all. They wouldn't dare."

Kilian smiled weakly. Oyen was evidently not aware of any contradictions in what he said. "So, mister De Graaff wishes to ensure the island he envisages himself governing is not disadvantaged in any way." He looked out of the window. During daytime, it offered a view of Gallows Bay, the south end of the harbour, and the careened ships lying on the beach. In the evening, only the moon and the stars were visible, and the window was a black hole. "What does all that have to do with me?"

"I was waiting for that question," said Oyen, sitting upright. "You, sir, are in a position to do both Saint Eustatius and the Republic a great service."

"Well well," Kilian muttered. "The Republic. Are you quite certain you're not overestimating my abilities?"

"Are you not Kilian Caduceusz? You studied with a pupil of the very learned Nicolas Hartsoeker, who was himself a student of the great Christian Huygens. This in itself is enough qualifi-

cation. But we are particularly interested in the work you did just prior to your departure from Holland."

Suddenly it seemed to Kilian as if his house no longer stood on top of a rock, but had been swept up by a hurricane, slammed down somewhere else, and now hung teetering on the edge of a bottomless ravine. He tried inconspicuously to grab the window frame. "Done lots of work in those days. Exercises in futility, for the most part."

Oyen fixed his gaze on him. "Yet...interesting enough to convince you to leave the country. Or was that decision precipitated by...the scandal?"

Was he falling already? Did the floor really have that tilt to it, or was it the wine? "I don't know if -"

"Mister Caduceusz, I'm afraid we *do*," Oyen waited. "Think back, if you will. Amsterdam? The rumours?" Another pause. "The suspicion of sodomy?"

"Un...completely unfounded," Kilian growled. "I was working on medicine that was to influence...in a certain way...the balance of the *humores*, the human body's basic substances. Of course, the Calvinists were not having any of that."

Oyen raised his hands. "Of course. But the stench of rumour can follow a person for a long time. You are a valued member of Saint Eustatius society, and we would like to keep it that way. And you can help us to help you."

"Such generosity. How?"

Oyen sat forward, and looked him straight in the eyes. "*Tractatus de animalculis humanis*."



September

The view from the windows of Kilian's new workshop was dominated by the irregularly truncated hilltop of the Quill. The workshop bordered a large sugar plantation near Concordia, and the dormant volcano towered

over it. Mister De Graaff had bought the house and had it extended, according to Oyen, to ensure that work on Statia's new future would not be constrained by lack of space.

A week after Oyen's first visit, he had sent Kilian an official 'invitation' to move in, a letter headed by the curly monogram of the *Second Chartered West India Company*, promising a handsome stipend, and, between the lines, threatening unspecified measures in case of his refusal.

Oyen put his hand on the shoulder of the young man in Company livery who had been walking behind him.

"Mister Caduceusz," he said jovially, gesturing broadly, "allow me to present your new helper. Henry is of African origin, yet remarkably quick of wit. He can read and write. Mister De Graaff trusts him, and expresses hope that with his assistance you will be able to accelerate your progress."

Kilian looked from the slave to Oyen, and back again. The young man lowered his eyes, but then threw a curious glance past Kilian's shoulder into the laboratory's interior. "I...share his hope," Kilian said. "Please express my gratitude to mister

De Graaff."

Oyen looked around approvingly. "I can assure you the pleasure is his, entirely. Mister De Graaff has a keen interest in philosophy. He may want to pay you a visit one of these days, so you can explain the principles of your discovery to him in person."

"Looking forward to it," Kilian said curtly.

Oyen took his leave, and Kilian studied his new assistant. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Henry, sir."

Kilian shook his head. "What's your real name?"

The young man looked at him wide-eyed. His brow puckered, but he remained silent.

Kilian raised an eyebrow. "Well...?"

Henry cast down his eyes again, and muttered: "I can't remember, sir."

"All right." Kilian turned and entered the house. "Gives you something to contemplate, then. Come in."

Henry was inquisitive, and buried himself in Kilian's books as soon as he discovered no one stopped him from doing so. Kilian asked him if he could read mechanical drawings, and put him to work sawing copper tubes and wooden beams. Later in the afternoon, while pausing, he asked him about the kind of work he did for mister De Graaff.

"All kinds. Helping the overseer on the plantation, sometimes. The workshop, mostly. Or the numbers. Writing it down in the books. Sometimes in his house. Or the master takes me with him to Government House."

"Really? So you are at the centre of power?"

Henry shook his head. "Mister De Graaff never forgets I'm there. If the business is important, he sends me away."

Something about his emphasis on 'mister De Graaff' made Kilian look up. "And mister Oyen?"

"He *always* forgets I'm there."

Kilian grinned. "Not very smart of him."

Henry shrugged. "Most people do."

"I know. And I won't." Kilian stood up. "Well, more work to do. We don't want mister De Graaff to be disappointed, should he decide to drop in."

Henry looked at him, but remained seated. He swallowed.

"What is it?" Kilian asked.

"If I may..."

"Out with it."

He swallowed again. "I don't think... I mean, mister De Graaff is very busy. I don't think he will have much time to come and visit."

"Indeed? And what makes you think so?"

"Just something I overheard, yesterday. He will..." He looked around carefully, and whispered: "He will be appointed Commander of Saint Eustatius, next week."

Kilian slapped his thigh, laughing out loud. "Thought so! They want to get rid of old Heyliger. Sooner than I expected, though."

"Commander Heyliger's appointment was only temporary. But, well..." Another shrug. "According to mister Oyen, the actual reason is England."

Kilian clacked his tongue and shook his head. "Of course. The British are furious, so the States-General is leaning heavily on the Lords Ten, who despite everything are still in control of

the Company, to put an end to Statia's support for the North American rebels. But not too heavily, of course, because business is business. If they replace Heyliger, at least they're being seen to make an effort." He looked at Henry and grinned again. "I wonder if they truly don't know what they're letting themselves in for."

The ground floor of the house was divided into three rooms. Smallest of these was the drawing office, which contained two large drawing tables and a selection of books Kilian had brought from his own house. Also here were his microscope, Leyden jars, and various other apparatuses.

The office was adjoined by the construction room, where separate parts of the work were made ready for assembly. Some parts needed the expertise of a blacksmith or a carpenter from Oranjestad, but Kilian preferred to draw as little attention from the island's artisans as possible. There would be more than enough of that, later on.

The largest room was the Delivery Room.

"What is that?" Henry whispered.

Kilian placed a hand against the side of the tall, cylindrical device standing in a corner. "This," he said, "is the Exogenerative Flask."

The wall of the cylinder consisted of a large number of straight wooden staves, held together by four metal hoops. It looked somewhat like a barrel, higher than a man and topped with a cone from which a number of ducts, thick and thin, wood and metal, rose upwards, like some sort of grotesque organ. Kilian pointed. "The feed and discharge pipes still need to be linked up. Tomorrow, hopefully."

Henry pushed his face up against a small round window in the front of the Flask. "It's dark," he said, disappointed.

Kilian reached up and turned a handle. A beam of bright sunlight fell through the exact centre of the device. Some of the tubes that entered from above ran the length of the chamber, almost reaching down to a small raised platform on the floor. The light formed a perfect circle on the bottom of a copper bowl covered with unspun cotton. "Ready to receive the germ," Kilian said. He could not keep the elation from his voice.

Henry looked over his shoulder. "The germ?"

"The animalculum. The life-containing seed. Hundreds, maybe thousands of generations in a single, microscopically small being. Waiting for the spark that will bring it to life. Under carefully controlled circumstances, with just the right temperature, light and sustenance, it will be fully developed in only forty weeks."

Henry's brow puckered again. "Is it... magic?"

Kilian clenched his fist and hit the wood. A hollow boom vibrated through the cylinder. "No magic! Nor alchemy, or *tak-win*, or whatever other names people have for things they don't understand. This is science!" He scowled. "That crude monkey Paracelsus, with his ravings about 'putrified semen, to be nourished with the arcanum of human blood', he didn't lack for imagination, I'll give him that. Or that *Liber Lapidum* of Geber the Persian. Or Galen's experiments. Best intentions, but hopelessly misguided."

"Apologies, mister Caduceusz. I didn't know -"

Kilian waved a hand. "You are excused. More learned people

should know better. If you knew what I've had to deal with, back in Amsterdam... Suspicions of witchcraft, accusations of Satanism, devilish alchemy..." He shook his head. "We are living in the Age of Reason now. This is science. Remember that, Henry."

October

The animalcula wriggled and spiralled through the microscope's eye, pushing themselves every which way with their lashing tails. Kilian sat up, wiped sweat from his brow, and massaged his neck. The nocturnal din of an army of tree frogs entered through the open windows; judging by their unrelenting zeal, rain was imminent.

He had forgotten how hard it was to separate a single spermatozoon from its active brothers. And the aberrations in the optical system of the decidedly second-rate microscope he was stuck with made accurate observations almost impossible. If only he had one of those new, achromatic instruments from England at his disposal.

Just after he had finally succeeded in separating a single animalculum from the rest, depositing it in a glass tube, the oil lamp lighting the mirror underneath the specimen started sputtering. He muttered a curse. "How can anyone practise science on this God-forsaken lump of rock?"

He pulled a copper bowl towards him, and carefully emptied the glass tube into the damp cotton it contained. Then he took the bowl to the other table, where a small Ramsden machine sat on a little platform. He put the bowl down and positioned the gleaming metal ball at the end of the machine's conductor over its rim.

He smiled. It was years ago that he had first attempted this. He had never been able to complete the experiment. But tonight...

Somewhat nervously he grabbed the handle of the electrostatic generator and began turning it. Leather pads attached to the frame rubbed against a circular plate of glass, producing a dry and whining noise. After a while a soft crackling started, as the glass and the metallic combs positioned close to it began to discharge continually.

Was it his imagination, or had the noise of the tree frogs increased? Again he wiped away sweat. The machine needed dry air to work.

Then his heart sank, because he heard the unmistakable hiss of rain starting to come down with tropical vehemence upon the porch roof. He groaned, and turned the handle with even more vigour. And just when he began to doubt the point of his efforts, it happened: with a loud crack, a bright spark bridged the gap between the conductor and the rim of the bowl.

He stopped the machine and stared, transfixed, at the damp cotton.

"Forty weeks?" mister Oyen asked, frowning.

"The mannikin will be fully grown by then." Kilian picked up



his Bavarian pencil from between the pages of Hartsoeker's *Essai de dioptrique*. "A man reaches maturity over a period of nineteen years. I have reduced that to less than three hundred days."

"How?"

"Among other measures, by careful consideration of the natural circumstances in the woman's womb, and improving those where necessary. For instance, it is well known that bodily warmth is closely connected to essential vitality. Hence, the higher temperature in the Exogenerative Flask will lead to an accelerated rate of development." He tapped his pencil against two copper pipes entering the Flask from below. "Don't touch these. The water runs quite hot..."

"Heat and fluids are necessities. But increased vitality also entails a heightened need for sustenance. We must ensure a continuous supply." He pointed upward, at one of the many tubes running down from the ceiling into the top of the Flask. "The duct on the far left delivers sweet porridge twice every hour, so our mannikin receives proper nourishment."

Oyen stepped toward the Flask, and looked through the small window. The copper bowl stood in the centre of a circle of light on the bottom of the chamber. Tubes surrounded it, their openings only a short distance from the unspun cotton.

He swallowed. A tiny, comma-shaped object lay close to the rim of the bowl. It was pale and hardly noticeable against its broken white bedding, and a thin tail disappeared into the cotton. "Is that...?"

Kilian nodded. "The ducts can be withdrawn in stages, to accommodate the growing mannikin. At a later stage we will make use of an artificial teat."

Oyen looked upwards. "Sunlight, I see."

"Quite important. The female womb does not admit light. Small wonder that the process inside it happens so slowly. After all, plants grow much quicker in the field than in the cellar." Kilian indicated a fat wooden pipe,

with a box-like bulge halfway, from which a spindle protruded. "Sunlight is guided into the Flask's interior by an ingenious system of prisms and lenses. This serves two purposes. Firstly, the light reaches the spot where it's needed most. Secondly, a valve in the duct – " he pointed at the spindle " – makes it possible to withhold the light for half an hour, every hour. This artificial circadian cycle ensures that over the course of a natural day, twenty-four days pass inside the Flask."

"And at night?"

Again, Kilian pointed upwards. "Batteries of candlesticks in the Regulation room. Enough light to maintain the illusion even at night."

"So, one day per hour you say..." Oyen nodded thoughtfully, then narrowed his eyes. "Is that... a strict limit?"

November

William's Rum House on Orange Bay was situated next to the largest brothel of Saint Eustatius. The densely packed strip of

land between sea and rock face was known as Lower Town, and it crawled with the kind of life that felt eminently at home in the tropical heat: the Dutch merchant.

Kilian downed a swig of rum. He hardly felt the sun burning down on his perpetually peeling white man's skin, as he stared, through the forest of masts belonging to the dozens of merchantmen in Orange Bay, at the western horizon. He had given himself an afternoon off, trusting Henry to look after the Flask. He always felt at ease in the company of sailors and longshoremen, more so than among the bewigged and bepowdered clientele of the Upper Town coffee houses, who tended to arouse irritation and impatience in him.

He had put up his elbows on the gallery railing, rum within reach, when cannon fire rang out across the bay. The noise of the crowd around him faltered momentarily, then resumed again. Kilian ambled down the stairs and onto the beach.

A long stretch of the bay was visible from the beach in front of the Rum House. Ships were forever coming and going in the harbour of Oranjestad, but one of the new arrivals in the roadstead was drawing particular attention to itself by the puffs of greyish white gun smoke rising from its portholes. The shots of the eleven-cannon salute were still reverberating across the bay. The ship was not very big, but the sleek lines of the manoeuvrable black brigantine emanated speed and deadliness. From her mizzen gaff she was flying a red-and-white striped ensign with a Union Jack in the canton.

"Whose colours are those?" someone behind Kilian asked.

"The Thirteen Colonies!" someone else shouted. "They've declared independence!"

"Brigands," he heard a British voice say without much enthusiasm. "Traitors. Hang 'em, they should. The lot of them."

Kilian turned his head and looked up at the fort on the cliff above Lower Town. Personnel were walking aimlessly along the parapet, clearly agitated and indecisive. He noticed a British vessel anchored a bit further up the bay. The possibilities for conflict were legion.

After a bit, a new person appeared on the fortifications. The new Commander, Johannes de Graaff, had arrived to take the lay of the land, and was now leaning on the parapet. His tricorne was silhouetted against the sheer blue sky. He turned his head, apparently making a remark to the person standing next to him, who immediately vanished from view.

Presently, a white puff of smoke appeared above the fort. A cannon shot resounded across the harbour. Then, a second, and a third.

Kilian counted a total of nine shots. He grinned wryly at the political ambiguity. De Graaff was the quintessential businessman: the rebellious Thirteen Colonies were excellent customers with whom he liked to remain on good terms, so their salute was answered. But by firing only nine shots – two guns less than a formal national salute – he would be able to maintain that this honour did not constitute official recognition.

Some cheers sounded from small groups of people that had witnessed the event. Mostly gunrunners, evidently, Kilian concluded. Which was to be expected. The new Commander of Saint Eustatius had revealed his political intentions, and they meant: business as usual.

No doubt Britain's reaction would be far more interesting.

1777

July

Kilian turned the key, unlocked the bolt, and grabbed the door handle. He placed his hand against the wood and squeezed his lips together. "Here goes," he murmured. And pulled.

The front half of the Exogenerative Flask swivelled open. Henry, who had been watching from a safe distance, stepped forward and peered over Kilian's shoulder. He recoiled from the sultry heat and the unpleasant smell drifting into the room.

The mannikin was sitting on the bottom of the Flask. Its legs pulled up, hands on its knees, head bowed, pale and hairless, it appeared to be unaware of its surroundings. It was almost a facsimile of Hartsoeker's engraving of the spermatozoon, but for the more regular proportions of its body.

"Is it alive?" Henry whispered.

Kilian was holding a short stick with a little knob of silk at its end. Carefully he nudged the mannikin's right shoulder. A shock ran through the curled-up body. Kilian reached up and pulled a lever. A long, slow groan issued from the mannikin's mouth as the feeding tube was pulled out of it. Kilian looked at a piece of paper containing a list of texts, and uttered a short phrase in a strange tongue.

The mannikin looked up. The expression on the wet and pallid face was vacant and without intelligence. Henry drew back even more. "What did you say?"

Kilian spoke another series of words. The mannikin started to tremble. Slowly it unfolded its limbs, put its hands on the floor of the Flask, set its feet down on the ground outside it, and stood up.

He stood more than six feet tall. His thin and completely hairless body swayed slowly from side to side, as if he had trouble keeping his balance. Occasionally the arms jerked, and the fingers curled up in involuntary grasping movements.

Kilian gave another command. The mannikin turned his head and started walking stiffly through the room. He marched out into the bright sunshine. Kilian walked after him and grabbed him by the arm, pointing at a stack of wooden planks lying in front of the porch. The mannikin bent down and lifted the topmost plank.

"He hasn't learned a language yet," Kilian explained to Henry, "so he only understands the *Lingua Adamica*, the original language spoken by mankind before that business in Babylon. Ancient Hebrew. James the Fifth of Scotland sacrificed a couple of illegitimate children to that experiment, two centuries ago. During the first years of their life they were raised by a mute, and afterwards they only spoke Hebrew. The same principle applies here."

Henry wrinkled his nose. "We should really wash him."

After a short while, all the planks had been moved inside. Kilian grinned. "Behold, Statia's diversification."

Oyen dabbed his forehead with a silk kerchief. "Something needs to be done about his, uh..." He stole a furtive glance at

the mannikin. "If only a loincloth."

Under Henry's watchful eye the mannikin lifted a copper pipe and slid it through a hole in the ceiling. Eight large cylinders were lined up in two rows against the walls. "We're almost finished installing the tubes," Kilian said. "Connecting everything up will take a few more days. And then the first Exogenerative Battery will be a reality."

Oyen walked along the row of Flasks, knocking against the wood. Again he gazed at the mannikin. Despite the harsh sunlight shining down on the pale skin every day, there was no trace of sunburn. There was still no hair growth either. Only the arduous labour in the workshop appeared to have had any effect, because tight and long muscles began to show underneath the skin. The facial expression was consistently blank.

"He does not resemble you very much, does he?" Oyen said offhandedly.

Kilian frowned, pretending not to understand the remark. "And why should he?"

"Well, he is your...son? As it were? From your seed?" Oyen rubbed his ear. "Which, incidentally, reminds me of what Samuel Tissoot wrote, some time ago, concerning the practice of self-abuse..."

Without a word Kilian turned around and walked into the drawing office. He returned holding a booklet which he pressed into Oyen's hands. "*Lucina sine concubitu*," he declared. "In which is proved, by most Incontestable Evidence, drawn from Reason and Practice, that a Woman may conceive and be brought to bed, without any Commerce with Man."

"Abraham Johnson, 1750," Oyen murmured, staring at the leather cover.

"This treatise was addressed to the Royal Society. He describes an experiment in which he administers a preparation containing some animalcula to a young woman, after which she becomes pregnant. He obtains the animalcula by constructing a clever device. His findings led him to the formulation of a *Doctrine of Winds and Embryos*, an idea first supplied to him by Virgil in the third book of his *Georgics*, in which the poet describes how a mare may become pregnant from the western wind."

"The western wind." Oyen looked at him in disbelief. He thumbed through the booklet. "...a wonderful cylindrical, cat-optical, rotundo-concavo-convex Machine," he read, "hermetically sealed at one End, and electrified according to the nicest Laws of Electricity..." Some device, that."

Kilian took him outside and pointed towards the roof. A wooden tripod carried a brass contraption looking something like a short telescope with a large, shallow bowl mounted at the position of the lens. A metal bar projected from the other end, which angled down and disappeared into the roof top. "Hill's *accumulator seminum*. Electricity finds its way up through that conductor, from the battery of Leyden jars in the drawing office. Animalcula are trapped in that sphere, over there."

Oyen held his kerchief high in the wind, frowning at Kilian.

"The prevailing trade wind tends to be easterly," Kilian admitted. "But the notion that our material is carried by the western wind only is, of course, figment."

"Of course."

"Current theory holds that under normal circumstances animalcula floating about in the air may be inhaled or ingested

by male members of the human species. Eventually reaching the seminal vessels, they take on characteristics of the individual: physical appearance, racial attributes and so on. After woman and man have had commerce, the germ finds its way to the womb, where it takes on more traits. The strength of those respective characteristics determines the embryo's gender. Of course, *our* animalcula have not travelled that journey, so theirs is a blank leaf, so to speak."

Oyen dabbed his forehead again. His periwig gleamed oilily. "Well. I am not a man of science, that much is certain. Only..." He tapped his cheek and gave Kilian a pensive look. "Something needs to be done about those forty weeks of incubation time."

"I don't see..." Kilian raised an eyebrow. "In this generation we plan to put the time to good use by teaching them the language. A selection of literary works will be read to the growing mannikins during the day periods, so they acquire a working knowledge. Shorter incubation times would make this difficult."

Oyen pursed his lips and turned away. "In forty weeks we can visit Africa. Twice."

"But *our* mannikins understand the Dutch language by then. Which increases their...market value." He tried to keep the distaste from his voice. "By a fair margin, I'll wager."

Oyen's instincts made him pause. At last he said: "We shall see."

1780

October

Rows of Exogenerative Flasks filled the great Factory hall. The heat was almost unbearable, and the smell of sugared porridge hung heavily over the aisles. Mannikins walked along the galleries above him, delivering the porridge, pumping the air and regulating the light. Fortunately, the noise drowned out the mumblings of the (paid) workers whispering Dutch literature via speaking tubes into the Flasks. Kilian had already heard more Hooft and Langendyk than he could stomach.

He closed the door, walked through the passage connecting the Exogenerative Factory to the smaller house which contained his office, and sat down behind his writing desk. He looked out. The trees on Little Mountain were swaying wildly to and fro against the overcast sky. Looking past the southern flank of the volcano he saw dark grey clouds massing above the island of Saint Christopher. The weather was strange. "Storm brewing," he muttered. "Again."

Standing behind a drawing table, Henry looked up. "Noticed it too?"

Kilian nodded at the clouds. "That's no ordinary rain. This could become serious. We'd better start tying everything down."

"Oh." Henry walked to the window. "I thought you meant the mannikins."

Kilian looked at him. "What about them?"

"They're..." Henry looked uneasy. "Distracted. Restive. I've seen it before, on the plantations. Work falters. If only the slightest thing happens...it's a powder keg."

Kilian frowned. "Odd, I haven't noticed anything. But now that you mention it..."

There was a knock at the door. Henry opened it.

Mister Oyen was standing under the hazy sky, with two sleepy-looking Company soldiers and a corporal behind him.

"Defection?" Kilian asked in disbelief.

Oyen raised his hands defensively. "That sounds terribly exaggerated..." He shifted in his chair. "I can assure you that mister De Graaff is quite satisfied with the results you have achieved. The mannikins are a resounding success. I'm sure you are aware of his visit to Amsterdam last year, to explain his course of action with regard to that little incident in '76, the salute of that American ship, the *Andrew Doria*? He praised your work while he was there. The lords at Middelburg, particularly, were very impressed. For the first time in many years there is now a real chance of growth for the West India Company."

Kilian kept silent. Oyen's unrestrained praise was disquieting.

"But," Oyen resumed, "success on that scale never goes unnoticed. And naturally, the British are first in line. It isn't enough for them to search our ships almost daily, and to keep complaining endlessly about our so-called support for the States of America. No, they even want our trade. In the Orient they have stolen our opium, now apparently they're ready to drive us out of the Occident, as well."

"Competition," Kilian said in resignation. "Of course."

"Questions have been asked in the British parliament. You must realise that you are a valuable target. If they discover the mastermind behind those cheap non-African *piezas de India* suddenly flooding the market... I mean, we can't allow anything to happen to you. Suppose they were to make you a more generous offer, or abduct you and force you to work for them. Or, failing that..." He made a suggestive hacking gesture in front of his neck. "The British Company of Merchants Trading to Africa is not one for taking half measures."

Kilian gazed outside. Unusually large numbers of frigate birds were circling over the hills, evidently looking for shelter from the coming storm. He nodded thoughtfully. "I see." He turned around and walked casually towards the door. "Well..." he said brightly. "Thank you for your words of warning. I will certainly take them to heart. But perhaps you will excuse me now. I must -"

"Mister Caduceusz," Oyen said gravely. "As your employer we take our responsibilities seriously. To avoid undesirable coincidences we offer you protection at this location, so you can proceed with your work quietly and without worries. We will furnish the remaining empty rooms, so you can take up lodgings here. You won't have to return to Oranjestad every night anymore. You will sleep here, eat here, and work here. Starting tonight."

Kilian opened the door, nodding at him. "I greatly appreciate your efforts, but there is really no need. I'm afraid I have to go

now."

He turned. Two armed soldiers blocked his exit.

Oyen's smile was broad and cordial. "Mister Caduceusz, I insist."

The hurricane arrived in the early morning.

A loud bang woke Kilian up, and for a moment he assumed that one of the cannons of the coastal battery nearby had fired. Then he remembered that the battery was unguarded, and he noticed the noise of the storm raging around the house.

There was another bang, followed by a loud crash and the sound of glass breaking. The house trembled. He got out of bed and peered through the window, but the darkness outside was impenetrable.

After lighting a lamp he opened the door to the office. A thick branch, probably belonging to the stray cotton tree next to the house, had crashed through the window and taken part of the wall with it.

The opposite door was thrown open, and one of the guards charged in. "What happened?" he shouted over the din, with a heavy Polish accent.

"What does it look like?" Kilian shouted back impatiently. "Bolt down all doors and windows. This one's going to be rough. Henry!" he called out. The young man appeared behind the guard. Kilian pushed the guard aside and handed Henry his key ring. "Go to the Factory, and get all mannikins down in the big cellar. And tell them to keep their hands off the supplies."

A short time later the five of them were sitting on the floor in the smaller cellar underneath the house. The hatch was tied firmly shut with extra lengths of rope. The oil lamp lit the anxious faces of Henry and the three soldiers as well as the book lying in Kilian's lap.

But he did not read. Again and again he caught himself listening to the increasing pandemonium outside. Finally he gave up and put the book aside.

Loud crashing sounds came from above. The ceiling trembled, grit and dust fell down. Kilian saw the Pole hurriedly crossing himself. The crashes became groans that almost drowned out the storm's wailing. "The house is lost," he said.

Slowly Henry rose to his feet, walked to the stairs and tugged at the ropes securing the hatch. He turned his head and shouted: "No trouble. That rope -"

A deafening crack came from outside. Instinct made Kilian jump up and pull Henry away from the hatch. They tumbled over backwards, and Kilian's chest was compressed painfully when Henry fell on top of him.

The hatch splintered. A massive, dark object broke through the wood and fell on the stairs where Henry had stood. The steps broke, and the object toppled over. It happened so fast that Kilian realised what had occurred only after he saw the Polish soldier's legs jutting out from underneath the object in strange angles. He pushed Henry aside and jumped up.

The scene looked unreal. The darkly greenish morning light



suddenly shining into the cellar revealed a large iron cylinder, attached to the remains of a wooden carriage, lying on the floor. A cannon. One of the six-pounders of the coastal battery had crushed the soldier and driven a giant splinter into his side. He groaned feebly as blood started pooling underneath him. Kilian stared up through the hole knocked by the gun, and raised his hands against the rain lashing into his face.

He started pulling at the cannon. Henry and the others got up, and the four of them managed to shift it aside. Before they were able to examine the Pole, there was another loud crash outside. Kilian pushed the others into a corner of the cellar.

Henry stared at him, shaking. "You saved my –"

Kilian clasped his shoulders. "Grab on to something!"

The ceiling was torn away.

By the end of the day the island had been destroyed.

When the wind began to subside, Kilian clambered from the remains of the house. Dazed and shaky on his legs, he staggered around the ruins. He was not entirely sure how they had managed to survive the violence. Somehow they had been able to hang on to each other in the relative shelter of the cellar, all those hours.

Henry and only one of the soldiers followed him. The Pole had not lasted the morning. Only later did Kilian realise that the corporal was no longer in the cellar either: maybe the hurricane had swept him away.

The destruction was complete. Hardly a tree or a house still stood on the Culture Plain between the Quill and the hills of Boven. The Exogenerative Factory was ruined: the Flasks were splintered, the tubing bent or vanished entirely. Yet most of the mannikins had survived; they were sitting on the ground, staring into space.

When the sun finally broke through, by the end of the afternoon, it hung blazing and fiery red above the horizon.

November

After the hurricane, life became hard.

The island was flattened. Plantations were destroyed, trees damaged or uprooted, and food was scarce. Of those who had survived, the slaves suffered hardest. Most mannikins had weathered the storm, and now endured the hardships as stoically as ever. They and the slaves were immediately put to work repairing the damage.

Oranjestad lay in ruins. Only stone buildings had had a ghost of a chance in the hurricane. Of most wooden houses only the foundations remained. Not even the fortifications on the cliff of Upper Town had been spared.

The devastation in the harbour was complete. All merchandise that had been stacked on the beach had vanished; only the warehouses still standing contained tradable goods. Ships that had not left before the storm had been thrown upon the rocks. Vessels that had fled the harbour had been destroyed at sea. And of course nothing was left of William's Rum House.

A week later Kilian learned that mister Oyen had been found dead under the remains of his house. Then Henry disappeared.

It forced Kilian to face the facts: although he had come to

regard Henry as a friend, to the rest of Statia he was simply a privileged slave. Now that the Exogenerative Factory was reduced to rubble, Henry had been put to work elsewhere: and his treatment was not less harsh than that of other Africans. In the chaos following the storm a fugitive slave might be able to remain hidden on the tiny island for longer than usual. *If* he could keep himself alive: the soldier crabs on the slopes of the volcano did not constitute a particularly nourishing diet.

The survivors found each other in shared hardship. With a desperate sort of enthusiasm the population set to work repairing their lives. Kilian, too, whose house on Gallows Bay had vanished, helped where he could. In exchange he shared in what food was available, imported from islands less seriously hit.

Until one morning a pair of Company soldiers tapped him on the shoulder, reminding him that mister De Graaff's offer was still valid, especially since British activity in the region was on the rise; given the lack of suitable accommodation, however, the safest place to be now was in Fort Orange.

Or to be more precise: under it.

1781

February

Kilian was jerked awake by the sound of gunshots. He pushed himself upright, staggered to the door and looked through the tiny window. The corridor was as dark and dank as ever.

"Hey!" he called. "Anyone?"

There was no answer, so he lay down on his bunk again. The past months in this cell had cured him from getting very worked up about whatever the Company had in store for him. He did not understand what they thought to gain by keeping him here. To be sure, he was not treated badly. He had his books within reach, and no doubt he was better fed than most other inhabitants of Saint Eustatius at the moment. But De Graaff's paranoia seemed completely out of proportion.

The gunshots, however, were a reminder that life outside the fort continued, even in the aftermath of a hurricane.

He grinned. Perhaps it was another provocative salute by the Americans. Perhaps they had sent help.

His grin froze when he *felt* the next shot hit the fortifications. He jumped up. Then he heard a key turning in the lock.

The door opened, and a young man looked in.

"Henry!" Kilian said. "What are you doing here?"

Henry put a finger to his lips and beckoned. "Come quick. There isn't much time, I think." He ducked back out.

Kilian stepped into the corridor. Henry was wearing black breeches and a simple white shirt, instead of his usual smart Company livery. "Not much time for what?"

Another shot struck, harder this time. "It's the British fleet. Not a good time to be stuck in a fort. Hurry." He pushed a cloak into Kilian's hands. "Disguise." He held up a leather bag. "And, um, some of your belongings that the Company had confiscated from the laboratory."

"What? I never even noticed!"

Henry evaded his glare. "Mister De Graaff urged me to be discreet..."

Kilian shook his head and walked silently past him.

The cellars were deserted, and when they reached the courtyard it became clear why. A number of soldiers were busy operating the guns, but without much success. The powder was damp, the cannon themselves were badly maintained, and the cannoneers were a shabby lot of Company mercenaries whose loyalty was less than exemplary at the best of times. It was unclear what the rest of the garrison was up to.

Without much difficulty they left the fort. They walked through the streets of Upper Town, which still looked messy, although people were working everywhere to get the town back into shape. "The perfect moment to attack," Kilian muttered. He paused and looked around. "Where are the mannikins?"

A short while later they stood on a vantage point behind a rock on a cliff overlooking Orange Bay. Kilian whistled. Fifteen heavily armed ships-of-the-line were blocking the roadstead. No other ship was allowed in or out. "But these are the French colours!" he said surprised, staring at the white ensigns.

Henry shook his head. "They're Britishers all right. The Republic is at war. That flag was a deception. I've heard that Commander De Graaff has been summoned to surrender instantly."

"Well, we saw that coming. And...? What is he going to do?"

Henry shrugged and pointed in the distance. "Over there, the flagship of count Van Bylandt. That's the Dutch navy in the West Indies: one ship against fifteen. Two hundred men against three thousand. Little choice."

Kilian stared. Longboats were lowered from the British ships, and started rowing shorewards between the other vessels anchored in the bay. "But look at those ships. There's French, Danes... Spaniards... Americans. Why don't they do anything?" He made a fist and punched his other hand. "De Graaff has a fleet of armed allies, down there. He should -"

Henry grabbed his sleeve and pointed. "Look!"

Kilian fell silent. A procession was moving down the steep cobbled path connecting Lower and Upper Town. A long column of mannikins, pale in the bright sunlight, dressed in loin-cloths and armed with muskets, marched down to the bay. "Right. Press-ganged." Kilian frowned. "But they've never had any combat training. How...?"

"I don't think mister De Graaff is overly concerned about that."

They watched the mannikins enter Lower Town and walk between the warehouses and past the stacked merchandise onto the beach. There they lined up in a long row, as a living barrier.

The longboats were nearing the shore. Kilian squinted, shading his eyes against the sun. "I'd give something valuable for a telescope right now. What's in those boats? They don't appear to be regular servicemen. In fact...it's almost as if..." He clenched his teeth, and squinted harder. Could this be possible?

Henry leaned forward on the rock. "Mannikins?" he asked.

"No," Kilian whispered.

"No," he whispered again.

"Wifikins," he said.

Henry looked at him. "What?"

Kilian closed his eyes and shook his head. He turned around and sat down on the rock, thinking hard. "They must have a different theory." He put his head into his hands. "Ovists...the ovists must have gained the upper hand in England." He looked up at Henry, without seeing him. "According to them, life does not originate from the spermatozoon, but from the ovum. Kerckringius, *Anthropogeniae Ichnographia*. If they could get the egg to germinate without involvement of male semen...of course the animalcula would not develop into mannikins."

"But into...wifikins." Henry stared wide-eyed at the beach. The first longboats touched the sand. But instead of British soldiers, out jumped large numbers of tall, burly women in breeches and wide smocks, carrying muskets and smallswords. They wore narrow tricorves that left their faces in shadow; but their resemblance to the mannikins was undeniable.

"Unbelievable," Kilian muttered. "Two diametrically opposed theories. Both tested empirically. Both true." He scratched his head. "Or both false." He stared into space.

"Uh...mister Caduceusz...?" Henry tapped him on the shoulder. He looked up. Henry nodded in the direction of the beach. Kilian turned around.

Groups of wifikins were standing at some distance from the defenders, ready to move into action. But although their corporals loudly, and increasingly desperately, called out the commands to load and present the muskets, both attackers and defenders suddenly appeared unsure. Weapons were put down in the sand, glances were exchanged. Kilian saw a number of muskets being raised, then being lowered again just as quickly.

One of the mannikins took a hesitant step forwards, dropped his weapon, and slowly began to shuffle towards the attackers. Another one followed his lead, and soon a growing number of his comrades fell in beside him. The wifikins, too, broke their formation and started to walk chaotically in the direction of the defence line.

Presently, walking turned into running, and both groups began to shed their clothing; hats were thrown aside, smocks pulled over heads, loin-cloths untied, and everything was dropped haphazardly on the sand.

Halfway between the surf and the warehouses the combatants met. And started, furiously, to copulate.

Kilian and Henry looked on in astonishment as the battlefield turned into a mass of pale human flesh, in an orgy which stretched the length of the beach.

The inhabitants of Lower Town who had taken cover in their warehouses slowly crept out of hiding, surprised at the lack of shots. Some stood watching, open-mouthed; others turned away sniggering. Hell and damnation were called down upon the participants, while elsewhere loud encouragement was shouted.



"It's as Barlaeus said," Kilian remarked after a while, shrugging stoically. "*Ultra aequinoxialem nihil peccatur*. No sin in the tropics. I should have known. Of course. The mannikins' fast development causes imbalance in the humours, which could lead to unslakable lust, in...situations like this. I've been working on a tincture, but I've never been able to test it. Lost in the hurricane."

Wordlessly Henry pointed at the leather bag.

Kilian looked at him. "Did you? Really?"

"I took whatever there was room for. Don't know if..."

Kilian opened the bag and rummaged about. He produced a little bottle and held it against the light. "Yes! This is it."

"That isn't very much, then."

"We don't need much. With *this* device," he said, pulling out a sort of tube with a nozzle on one end and a handle at the other, "we can spread it on the wind, so it reaches all mannikins." He held up the tube. "Hold this. Let's fill it quickly."

"And what effect will it have on the wifkins?"

Kilian pursed his lips. "I'm not sure. Perhaps it will work for them, or perhaps it will have the opposite effect. It's a gamble, I admit. Could you...?"

Henry gazed at the tube, then looked at Kilian, and finally said: "No."

Kilian blinked, then grinned. "It's not *that* heavy, you know."

Henry was silent.

Frowning, Kilian stood up. "What's the matter? Trust me, it's completely safe. It won't harm them."

Henry shook his head and turned away. "You Dutchmen are all the same. For a while I thought you, mister Caduceusz, were different, but... You're just as obsessed as all the merchants here."

"What do you mean?" Kilian felt himself getting impatient. He looked in the direction of the beach. The tincture would be most effective while the orgy was still in progress. How long would it last?

He sat down again, put the tube between his knees, and unscrewed the top. "Well?"

"You know... I was born in a land which I remember as Ebo." Henry spoke softly. "But when I ask other Africans about it they tell me they've never heard of it, that it doesn't exist. It's many a day's journey from the trading posts of the Gold Coast. My father carried the *ichi*: he was an important and respectable man. But the neighbouring kingdom sent slavers, and I was abducted. I was a small boy. Eight years old? Who knows? I was sold, and sold again. Sometimes I lived as a son of the house. Then one day I was sold to strange red-haired men, who took me with them on their ship. I had become the property of Holland's pride: the West India Company. From that moment on I was nothing."

Kilian nodded distractedly, while he carefully removed the stopper from the tincture bottle. "The slave trade is despicable. Degrading. I don't want anything to do with it."

"No, you do not trade in slaves." Henry paused. "You create them."

Kilian almost dropped the bottle. "I bloody well don't!" he lashed out, immediately regretting it. He closed his eyes, forcing himself to calm down. "I merely create the right circumstances, so that the germ of life can develop. You've seen it. What makes you think otherwise?"

Henry looked at him. His eyes were wide. Kilian saw the tremor in his lips. "You treat them no differently. Just like the masters treat us. As if you have the right to..." he gestured at the bottle "...to interfere with their natural behaviour."

Kilian shook his head and gripped the bottle more tightly. "Interfere? This *is* their nature. The tincture has been distilled from their own bodily fluids. I use it to help them keep their most primal urges in check."

Henry took a step backwards. He stared at the beach. "Keeping primal urges in check. Something the Dutch excel in, so I've heard."

Sighing, Kilian poured the contents of the bottle into the tube. "Henry - " He was interrupted by another broadside from the British vessels.

"They're getting impatient," he said, peering at the line of ships. "The admiral has noticed that things aren't going anywhere. I wonder how many men he has in reserve. I'll have to hurry." He put the tube together again, and looked up at Henry. "So are you with me or not?"

Henry shook his head. "A slave ship is lying anchored at Tumble Down Dick Bay, behind the hills, out of sight of the British. A ship full of slaves who have taken their freedom into their own hands. We will be heading south until we find a place where we can live."

Kilian looked him in the eye, nodding slowly. "And then?"

"Times change, mister Caduceusz. It won't be long now before these dreams come true. Freedom for everyone. If not on Statia, then elsewhere."

"In that case..." Henry extended his hand.

"Good luck, Henry."

"And my name is not Henry." The young man took his hand. "It's Osei."

Kilian raised an eyebrow.

"You asked my real name, and I said I didn't remember. Osei is the only thing I have, that they couldn't take from me. I never tell it to anyone. But, well...you saved my life."

Kilian grinned. "Godspeed, Osei."

He stood at the top of the steep cobbled path to Lower Town, gazing across the water at the western horizon. The crowd passed by him - some on the way down, to contemplate the sinful spectacle from a closer distance; others (not half as many) to absent themselves from it as quickly as possible.

Kilian hardly noticed. He was thinking of Osei's reproaches.

Was he creating slaves? Did he interfere with nature?

He stared at the device in his hands. Nonsense! He believed in science. Science must serve man. Man inquired into the processes of nature, and tried to determine the best way of applying his findings. *That* was in man's own nature. And there



was so much yet to be discovered: this age had seen only the beginning. Moreover, this weapon enabled him to keep Saint Eustatius from being invaded by the enemy. If science couldn't be used in warfare, then where?

And yet...

Pressing his lips together he turned his head and looked northward. A small figure clad in black and white was making its way toward the hills, toward its freedom.

The wild encounter on the beach was still going strong, watched closely by the cosmopolitan Oranjestad crowd and the sailors on the ships in the bay. Officers on the British warships looked on in resignation. Somewhere the admiral would be staring through his telescope, seething and speechless – hopes of a quick victory and rich spoils long gone.

Kilian weighed the tube in his hands. "No sin in the tropics," he said, to no one in particular. He spat on the cobbles, put the tube over his shoulder, and allowed the flow of people to carry him down.

> Paul Evanby is a Dutch writer who has published stories in various magazines, anthologies and collections. Although not much of his work has been translated into English, in the UK and the US his stories have appeared in *The Elastic Book of Numbers*, *Harrington Gay Men's Literary Quarterly*, and online at *DayBreak Magazine*. His first novel, *De scripturist*, appeared in 2009 from Dutch publishers Mynx. His second novel is scheduled for autumn 2010. Look for him on the web at metromantuckyck.net.

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THAT AFTERNOON, BECKER LEFT WORK EARLY AND headed for Chaney's Bar. It was not a particularly responsible thing to do, especially in light of his recent promotion to Project Manager and next week's scheduled presentation on the pros and cons of whatever it was that he was currently ignoring as it sat nagging at him from the pile in his in-tray. But maybe that was their fault. Maybe they should have thought of that before they promoted him. Maybe they should have gleaned that he wasn't built to withstand the pressures of *being* Project Manager. That if his piece-of-shit alcoholic psyche had been clinging to the edge of everyday existence by the merest of fingertips beforehand, now it was all set to let go and slide down into the void once and for all.

Stupid damn psyche.

He crossed Midwich Avenue through the slow-moving afternoon traffic, caught himself in a window of the Meyer World Store, reflection staring back amidst the mannequins advertising this week's look. *Dickhead*, he thought to himself, not unreasonably. At least abandoning eating in favour of liquid nourishment was stripping the unwanted pounds from his jowls.

Down William Street, the sheer faces of the office buildings seemed to rise up even higher as the road narrowed, but crossing Cornwallis Parade, he turned and headed east to where the city opened itself up into the lawns and rotundas of Westfall Park, then beyond, to the Hub Station, rising one massive grey storey against a backdrop of more skyscrapers, their windows gleaming with afternoon light.

The Hub Station had been there...how long? He honestly couldn't remember. A month, a year? Longer? The sodden synapses in his brain weren't feeding back to him like they used

to. He wondered idly what else he couldn't remember, then laughed out loud. If he couldn't remember what he couldn't remember, how the hell was he supposed to remember it?

Becker cut across the park, joining in with the pedestrian flow. Even now people were drifting towards the Hub – as they always seemed to be – a hundred of them, two hundred, in ones or twos or small groups, making their way along the paths between the border rows of perennials and the avenues of trees shedding their autumn leaves.

Some walked in small groups, preferring to share it with friends, talk about it for the last time. For others, it was an intensely personal experience, to be gone through alone. They walked slowly, some of these, like the damned travelling to their own execution. They understood that to cauterize the painful recollection, of loss or hurt or abuse, they would need to live it again, one more time. And even though they would not feel the pain afterwards, the prospect was still enough to fill them with dread.

Becker's path across Westfall Park took him close to the Hub. It really was a monstrosity. How it had ever been granted design approval he had no idea. A football field wide and set on eight acres of paving, it was the height of a five-storey building yet with no windows anywhere. The whole of it, from the ground up to the flat roof, was featureless grey granite. Front and centre were the tall revolving glass doors, which even now were ushering people inside.

The exit was somewhere in the rear – Becker had never bothered to find out exactly where – and as people came out from round back, most of them made their way straight over to the Hub Kiosk. Each treatment came with a voucher that could

CANDY MOMENTS

BY ANTONY MANN



be exchanged for half a dozen Hub Candy bars. Becker had no idea what that was about – replenishing energy somehow lost in the treatment, maybe, like drinking orange juice after giving blood – but during the day there was always a queue of ten or twenty at the kiosk, and the less than startling blue-on-blue candy wrappers were becoming a common sight blowing about the city parks and streets.

Beyond the small kiosk, near the Hub Station itself, but not near enough to attract the close attention of the security guards posted at the revolving doors, there stood a small group of people holding megaphones and placards. The anti-Hub protesters had been around for almost as long as the Hub Station itself. “Close down the Hub, close down the Hub,” they chanted, which in Becker’s view was not very imaginative. Their placards were printed with equally uninspiring slogans such as KEEP YOUR MEMORIES KEEP YOUR SELF and WHO RUNS THE HUB? WE WANT TO KNOW!

People were used to them by now, and usually just ignored them, but today, as Becker watched, a tall professional-looking woman in brown slacks and a white, long-sleeved blouse diverged from her path towards the Hub, striding angrily over to the protesters.

“You can have my memory if you want it! You can have it!” she shouted, haranguing them.

“Don’t go to the Hub,” said one of the protesters gently, a man in his fifties, who at the same time pressed a leaflet into the tall woman’s hand.

“Do you know what it is?” she said savagely. “Do you know what it is that I’m living with?”

“How many times have you been?” the man asked. “Try not to go today, your memories are a part of you, they make up who you are.”

“You wouldn’t want *this* memory, you wouldn’t want any of them!” the woman shrieked, her face twisting into a grotesque mask as she screwed up the leaflet and threw it away. “You don’t know how it is, you don’t understand!”

With that, she stormed off, and had soon disappeared through the revolving doors. The security guards had been watching the exchange, and now one of them raised his walkie-talkie to his lips, but other than that neither stirred at his post, and no move was made to move the protesters on or molest them in any way.

By the time Becker reached Chaney’s his shirt was damp with too much sweat. It was a pokey little dive half above, half below street level, with no Chaney behind the bar, no Chaney wiping tables, no Chaney anywhere.

“Is Chaney in?” Becker asked as he took a stool at the bar. The bartender didn’t even look up. He just kept on polishing the glasses, slowly and methodically, as though it actually meant something.

“Nope,” he said.

“Will he be in later?”

“Nope.”

“When do you expect him?”

“Never.”

Chaney had been dead seven years – or was it nine? – and was unlikely to make an appearance again, unless as a part of some old drunk’s woozy hallucination. *Or some young drunk*, Becker thought. That would of course necessitate him remembering what Chaney had actually looked like. The image was possibly there inside him somewhere beneath all the dead and dying brain cells.

The bartender took a tumbler and filled it with mid-priced whisky from a quart bottle, then set the drink and a bag of peanuts on the counter where Becker’s hand wasn’t going to miss them.

“Having a good one, Mr Becker?” he asked.

“I’ll let you know,” Becker replied. “How’s business, Dave?”

The bartender nodded towards where Chaney’s only other customer sat reading a paper at the back of the bar where it was even darker than the front.

The woman was around thirty. She had a narrow, interesting face and shoulder-length brown hair that looked as though it wanted to escape from the loose arrangement it was tied into. For a second she looked up, straight at Becker, and he looked back. Then she turned back to her paper. She didn’t remind him of Anna at all, but then, none of them ever did.

“I got a promotion,” said Becker. “Project Manager.”

“Well that’s cause for celebration,” said Dave.

“That’s what I thought.” Becker raised his glass, then drained it, setting it down for Dave to refill.

“So what does the Project Manager do?”

“Manage the project.”

“And what is the project exactly?”

“I’d be fascinated to know that myself,” Becker conceded. “What can I say? I’m good at interviews.”

“Hey, good for you.”

While Becker began to drink with intent, Dave walked round the bar, picked up a small waste bin from the floor and emptied it into a larger one in the corner. He stood staring down at the accumulation of rubbish in the black bin liner, then reached in and picked out a candy wrapper, blue on blue. He hung onto it for a few seconds, then dropped it back into the trash and went back to the bar. Picking up his cloth again, he resumed his polishing.

After a moment he said, “You ever been to that Hub place?”

Becker looked up. “No.”

“I was thinking of trying it out, that’s all.”

“Don’t let me stop you. Something you want to forget?”

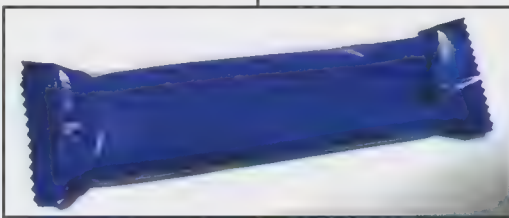
“Nah,” said Dave. “Believe it or not, my life has been pretty uninteresting so far, for the bad stuff anyway. Sure, I’ve had my moments, I guess we all have.”

“I guess so,” said Becker.

“I know a guy who went, he didn’t remember anything about how they did it. Nothing at all. I thought I might go see. Maybe I’ll relive the time my first girlfriend dumped me. Or maybe some other thing. Just to see what it’s like, you know?”

“Yeah, really push the boat out, Dave,” he murmured, but he was nodding to himself.

People he worked with had visited the Hub Station. His boss Erica was one of them. She had not told him the nature of the



memory she had expunged, that was personal. But of the process itself, she had confessed to him, she had no recollection. There was the huge waiting room, and the numbered tickets, and the number being called. Then, the walk through the blue door. After that, nothing, until the exit into sunshine. She had told him, though, what it was like afterwards, to watch the old memory with the mind's eye, like a slow motion film right there in the brain, to be able somehow to *remember* that she had in fact lived it all over again, but to feel utterly indifferent to what it had once signified. He had asked her whether that felt good or bad, and she had frowned. His question had no meaning. Feeling no longer came into it.

The woman in the corner had been listening to their conversation. Now, she banged her empty glass down onto the table, pushed the newspaper to one side, and abruptly stood. She walked over.

"Excuse me," she said. "You're talking about the Hub."

"That's right," Becker nodded.

"I don't mean to butt in, but you should know. I lost my sister to the Hub. You're a fool if you go."

"What do you mean?" Dave said, winking at Becker. "She went in and never came out?"

"I mean she's a slate."

"A what?" Becker had never heard the term before.

"Blank slate. Don't worry, you'll hear it again, more and more. She went a lot, when it first started. Maybe nine or ten times. She had troubles, she was assaulted at college. Other things. So she went to wipe them all out, the feelings."

"And did she?" Becker asked.

"Yeah, she did. Before, it had used to make her break down and all sorts. She was in counselling. But then, after the Hub, she was fine about it."

"So it was good," said Dave.

"It was great," the woman said. "Then she started to go every week. Then every few days. And now she's a slate."

"She goes every few days?" Becker asked. "Why?"

The woman shrugged. "That's what they do. That's how it happens."

"But they don't allow that, do they?" said Dave. "Why don't they stop it?"

"Exactly. Why don't they? Ever tried to talk to Governor Kosdyne's office about it?"

"Now that you mention it, no," said Becker. Kosdyne had been in power over a year now. Becker hardly knew a thing about him.

"Well I have," the woman said. "And I'm not the only one."

"I voted for Kosdyne," said Dave the bartender.

"So it's your fault," she said. It was impossible to tell whether or not she was joking. "Anyhow, I've told you now, so it's your own stupid problem if you go." She was looking at Dave as she said it, but then she turned to Becker. "And you ought to give up drinking. You're a nice enough looking guy at the moment, but it won't last. You'll lose it all and end up in the gutter."

Becker smiled, almost laughed in fact. Then he extended his hand. "Hi. I'm Joe Becker. I've just been promoted. Project Manager."

The woman thought about smiling back, but decided not to. Still, she took his hand and shook it. "Molly Briar. I know, it's a

goofy name, but what can you do?"

She left quickly. Becker watched her as she went.

"What the hell was that?" said Dave while the woman was still within earshot.

Becker waited until she had gone. "I don't know," he said.

She didn't remind him of Anna, not at all. But she reminded him of something.

THE NEXT THREE EVENINGS, Becker looked and waited for Molly Briar in Chaney's, drinking late as other patrons came and went sporadically. She never showed. Then, the following day, while he was out eating lunch at a sandwich bar and contemplating drinking the rest of the day away, he saw her. She was over the street at a newsstand, buying a magazine.

He ducked across through the crawling traffic and followed her as she walked down Midwich towards where it intersected with Faulkner. She was easy to spot: she wore a red beret and red scarf against the autumn chill. He stayed twenty yards behind, keeping her in sight amidst the lunchtime throng. Then, he began to feel like a creep. Following women down the street now? Is that what it was about these days? He would either have to catch her up or let her go.

He stopped dead, watching the red beret as it bobbed away through the crowd, about to disappear into the human soup. Then he decided. He walked after her, quickening his pace. Out of condition, out of breath, he caught her at the corner as she waited at the lights. For a moment he stood behind her, hovering and indecisive, wondering what the hell he was doing. Then he tapped her on the shoulder.

It took her a moment to recognise him, then she nodded hello and turned back to the street.

"Hi," said Becker.

The lights changed from amber to red, and the cars ground to a halt. A van driver detonated his horn as a taxi tried cutting from one lane to another. Molly crossed with the green, and Becker crossed with her.

"What now?" she said. "I'm going to be stalked by a drunk?"

Ouch.

"Not to mention your breath stinks. You could at least have bought some mints."

"Sorry," he said, "I didn't know I was going to be pestering you like this. Otherwise I would have made more of an effort."

That at least brought a *half* smile.

"So what do you want?"

"Nothing," he said.

"Well that's a start."

Molly stopped outside a glass-fronted office building. The foyer was full of pot plants, and men and women in business suits waiting at elevators.

"This is where I get off," she said.

"Happy travels."

She looked him up and down.

"So are you one of those *alcoholic* alcoholics, or are you still in denial?"

"Alcoholic."

"What's the sob story?"

He hesitated, then said, "My wife Anna. Died in a car crash."

"And?"

"I was at the wheel."

"So you survived."

"Allegedly."

That he could talk like this to a virtual stranger – he found it odd, yet also liberating. Like an improv street meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous.

"I see that you're okay at confessionals," said Molly. "Had some practice maybe."

"A little."

"Well your five minutes are up, Joe Becker." She took a business card from her purse and dropped into his hand. MOLLY BRIAR, it said. CATHCART & ASSOCIATES. Whoever they were. "If you can stay sober for a fortnight, give me a call. I don't go out with habitual drinkers."

He stopped her at the door. "How will you know?"

"I'll figure it out," she said, then disappeared inside the building.

"So HOW DO you know?" he asked.

"Because you look like shit," she said.

He smiled at that, and guessed it was true.

Down on the river, the ducks were out in force. Becker watched them from where he and Molly sat on the bench near the bank. The sun was out, but it was almost a winter light now, wan and less than warming. Becker was partly amused by and not quite fascinated at how fast the ducks could move when a piece of bread was stake. They were bullies, too. They were bullying each other, they were almost bullying the water, churning it with their feet. They were picking on a little kid with a stale loaf, terrorising him as he stood there on the bank, surrounding him and snapping at him with their beaks. Soon he began to cry. His mother hurried up from somewhere to rescue him, and the ducks whined and complained and reluctantly left the boy alone.

The first day, the darkness had descended early. He knew very definitely that if he didn't find a drink soon, the earth would tear a hole in itself and drag him down into the pit before closing back over again. Then, as he lay sweating and afraid in his bed, the guilt had enveloped him and begun to whisper to him the litany of his sins, his transgressions against himself, but also those against his friends and family, all the people over the years whom he had saddened and angered and repulsed with his drinking and drunken behaviour. So easy, so easy to make this dread feeling leave him be. Just one drink and it would all be better.

But he had held firm, he didn't really know how. Maybe it was Molly Briar. Though he hardly knew her, and would most likely never see her again, he simply didn't want to give her the satisfaction. Or maybe it was just time – time he did this thing, gave up the booze before it stripped the last of the humanity from his soul and left him to wander around in the shell he was fast becoming. At nine o'clock he had gotten up, taken a shower, drunk a pint of water, rung in sick, popped two Valium and gone back to bed. For a week.

He had taken the phone off the hook and switched off his

mobile, booted up his laptop and ordered pizza over the internet, turned on the TV and let the crap wash over him – the reality shows, the laugh-track sitcoms, the exploitation news. He had quelled the cravings with tranquilisers, subdued the fear and the guilt with boredom, watching until his eyes started to bleed. But every hour of trash was another hour without having a drink.

On the eighth day, feeling stretched thin almost to transparency, with hands that betrayed him when he shaved and left his face beardless but cut to ribbons, he had gone back to see if he still had a job. He had sat at his desk in his office with the door shut and wept.

On the ninth day, he had picked up the folder from his in tray, and begun to work.

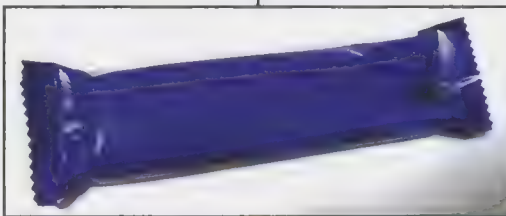
On the fourteenth day, he had called Molly Briar.

"So IS THIS a date?" she asked. It was all the wide green of Westfall Park here, with the Hub Station half a mile behind them, out of sight and mind. On the far side of the river, the city spread out beneath its skyline, encroaching almost to the water's edge.

"If it is, it isn't much of one," said Becker.

"It's okay, I'm low maintenance."

She smiled, and he smiled back, and felt a warmth inside him which, for the first time in a long time, didn't come from the wine or the whisky.



"How is it going, the not drinking?" she asked. "How do you feel?"

"Raw," he told her. "Exposed. Like there's a precipice in front of me, but every step I take, I'm not going over. I'm on the edge, about to fall. As though I'm going to be there forever."

It was true – he felt that way. But he didn't tell Molly about the other feelings he was having, and the pictures that were flashing in his brain: images of Anna, and of the crash. Images which the drink had so successfully obliterated. And with them came the sadness and the guilt and the longing.

"I'm sorry," said Molly. "I've put you through this, haven't I? What if it's all for nothing? What if I don't like you sober or drunk? What if I tell you to piss off?"

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" said Becker. "Because for some reason it doesn't."

"Anyhow, that's all in the wonderful future," she said. "Right now..."

She stopped, watching and listening as two handsome, well-dressed women in their thirties strolled slowly by, taking the air, chatting with each other.

"We're taking Edward to the Hub," one of the women was saying.

"Why? What happened?" asked her companion.

"He's being bullied in the playground. Two or three very nasty older children, butter wouldn't melt in their mouths. Everyone knows it's going on, but nobody at St Michael's seems to want to do anything about it. We're moving him to a different school, but we don't want him carrying that feeling around with him. Being bullied just once can make you vulnerable to it again, Roger says. Possibly your whole life. You get the victim mentality and

can't shake it off."

"I didn't know they let you take children to the Hub," the other woman said.

"Oh yes, quite a few people are doing it now."

The women were drifting out of earshot, and Molly turned to Becker. "You see?" she said.

"See what?"

"The Hub Station. It's kids now. What next?"

"I don't know. Dogs? Parrots?"

She sighed in exasperation, then stood up and took him by the hand. "You're coming home with me," she said. "To meet my sister."

MOLLY LIVED in a flat on the East Side, in one of the new gentrified developments, reclaimed slums and ghettos turned into unaffordable high-rise housing for the few. She must have been earning big to live here.

"What is it you do again?" Becker asked as they went up in the lift towards the fifth floor.

"I'm a lawyer," she said.

"A lawyer? Then if you don't like it so much, you can do something about it, right? The Hub. You and your firm."

"Actually, that's what we're working on," she said.

"You are? How?"

"As if I can talk about it. Come on."

They emerged from the lift and Becker followed Molly down the hall to Flat 18. She took her keys from her pocketbook and opened the door.

Molly's sister Grace was sitting in the kitchen-living room on a beanbag, watching rolling news on television. She was in her late twenties, with wavy brown hair, wearing cut off jeans and a halter top. She was very pretty.

She looked up briefly as they came in, then waved and turned back to the war in Turkey. "Hiya guys," she said, eyes still glued to the screen.

"Hey Grace," said Molly as she turned the kettle on. "This is a friend of mine. Joe Becker. He's a stinking alcoholic but I kind of like him. We'll see if he goes back to the booze or not. Won't we, Joe?"

Becker smiled lamely and began to colour, but Grace turned and looked at him with a face as blank as her big green eyes. It was unnerving. There was no *feeling* in her face, no expression. Becker found it impossible to read her. She was lacking in affect. He saw that the floor where she sat was covered in the blue-on-blue of Hub Candy wrappers, and her mouth was smudged with chocolate.

"I'm watching the news," she said.

"See what I mean?" Molly said to Becker as she tipped instant coffee straight from the jar into two cups. "See the candy wrappers?"

"There's a war on in Turkey," said Grace. On television, bombs were going off, killing soldiers and civilians, though they weren't showing the bodies.

"It's been going on eight years," Molly said to her sister.

"Eight years? That's a long time."

"She's a botanist," said Molly to Becker, pouring hot water then milk. "Well, used to be. She can't work now."

"But the Hub doesn't take your memories, it just takes the

feelings," said Becker. "The bad feelings. That's what people say."

"Think about it," said Molly. "What *are* memories?"

"I don't know. What are they?"

"Well they're more than just what you bloody *think* about something, that's for sure."

"I'll get a job, sis, I promise," said Grace. By way of explanation, to Becker she said, "I'm just staying here." Then she frowned. "Hey, is your name Joe Becker?"

"So people tell me," Becker said.

"Were you here before?"

"I just got here."

Grace nodded vaguely. "Well, good to see you again," she said, turning back to the television.

Becker looked at Molly.

"You take sugar?" she asked.

"No," he said.

THEY HAD SEX in Molly's room by bedside lamp light, three times, and by the third time, they felt like they were almost making love, as the song went. They talked until four, the nothings and the everythings that new lovers talk about, then they made love again, and slept for an hour before getting up and showering and going to work. They didn't say a whole lot on the Tube, and when she got off a stop earlier than him, Molly didn't kiss him goodbye, but she did nod and smile, which he took to be a good sign. He watched her through the windows of the carriage as she disappeared into the crowd.

As soon as she was out of sight, the feeling which had been Molly suddenly became the feeling which had been Anna, and it all turned to dust in his mouth.

WALKING FROM THE Tube stop to work that morning, he began to see them in the streets, or at least, he thought he did – the slates. Maybe it was a trick of his mind, frayed as it was by the strain of the last two weeks, by lack of sleep and lack of booze. And it was nothing tangible, nothing he could put his finger on: a quality in their facial expressions, a sense of what lay behind their eyes as they glanced at him and moved on, carried away by the peak-hour flow. There weren't even that many, perhaps one in ten or twenty. But there was an obscure blankness about them which reminded him of Molly's sister Grace.

It might have concerned him, had he not been seeing Anna as well, fleeting glimpses of her short, dark hair and the long blue dress she had been wearing the night he had killed her. A ghost in the crowd, indifferent yet accusing. And every time he saw her it sent a blade into his heart.

"I CAN'T GET out from under this," he was saying.

His office felt like a wasteland. His only connection to the real was Molly, breathing on the other end of the line.

"Don't do it, Becker," she said. "Give it time. It's only been a fortnight. What about last night? Didn't it mean anything to you? It meant something to me."

He guessed, for her, that was a big admission.

"It meant a lot to me too," he said.

"Then don't do it. If you do, it'll be over between us, I guarantee it."

"Why?" Becker said.

"I want the *whole* Becker, screwed up or not."

"It's just one memory."

"Becker," said Molly. "We might get them. What if we can shut them down? It could happen. Things are in motion. We have support. We could shut the Hub down."

"But you don't think you will. I can hear it in your voice."

"It's the Governor. Kosdyne. He has a lot of power now. But we have to fight that power, right?"

"Maybe the Hub is a good thing," he said. "For some people, anyway."

"If it's good for some, then it's bad for others, isn't it? Why... why don't you start drinking again?"

He laughed at that, a bitter laugh which spat itself into the receiver. "I'd rather not. Thanks anyway."

"But you know how hard it is now, stopping. That's in your favour. Start drinking again, and in the meantime, you can look for help. We'll do it together. You need a structured programme. I've got money. I can pay for rehab. Doesn't matter how long. Months if you need it."

"No," he said.

"Becker," she said. "It may well be that the world is falling apart. Don't fall with it. What will happen when they outnumber us? When there's nobody left that cares for anything except those fucking candy bars?"

"I'll think about it," he said, and as he did so, the door to his office opened and Anna walked in. Her face was a bloody ruin. Strips of lacerated flesh hung down from her cheeks and forehead. One of her eye sockets was little more than a congealed wound. Broken in three places, her right arm dangled uselessly at her side.

She dropped a file on his desk, smiled at him, and left.

HE NOTICED THAT the crowds walking towards the Hub were thicker than they had been a month ago. Instead of two hundred people, now there were a thousand, coming from all directions. He kept an eye out as he went, and he could tell: there were slates among them, many slates. They had the blank faces, the dreamy blank eyes.

The queues were longer at the Hub Kiosks, too. Three times as long. But people waited calmly in line for their candy bars, some talking amongst themselves, most not. At the back of one of the queues he saw Molly's sister Grace, voucher clasped in her small hand. As he looked at her, she glanced back, but there was no recognition in her face.

He could see up ahead, there was something of a bottleneck at the Hub Station's front entrance, but the people were patient, and the thick glass doors revolved smoothly and constantly, swallowing the crowd one by one.

It was breezy, and candy wrappers swirled around Becker's ankles as he walked.

BECKER LOOKED UP as the man adjusted the strap, tightening it around his forehead. His wrists and ankles were already bound to the chair. It was a comfortable seat, made from some type of leather, possibly synthetic, dyed black. It fitted snugly into the

tight little cubicle. Becker was facing the blue door he had come through. He guessed there were other people in other cubicles nearby.

"Is all this really necessary?" Becker asked.

"It's a commonly asked question," the man replied. He was tall and thin with short dark hair and sharp features, and he looked familiar. Becker couldn't place his racial type – Slavic maybe, but without the typical broad forehead and darkness of complexion. In fact, the man's skin was almost white, as though he'd been out of the sun too long.

He read the name tag on the man's blue tunic.

"Kosdyne," said Becker. "Like the Governor? You know you look pretty well like him."

"That's right," said the man.

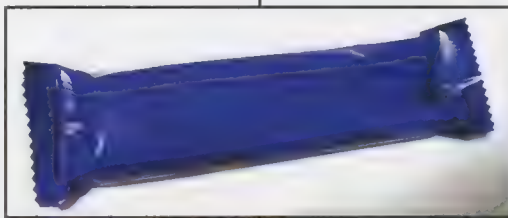
"Are you related?"

"That's right."

"Really? You're related to Kosdyne? So he pulled a few strings and got you a job strapping people into chairs in the Hub, did he?"

"That's right."

Becker laughed. *Give a little back to me here, pal*, he thought. He was nervous as all hell. Despite being aware that he wouldn't remember it afterwards – not like he did now, at any rate – the knowledge that he was about to relive the crash had him on edge.



Kosdyne turned away and flicked a switch on a small control panel set on a spindly metal pedestal. Silently, the leather chair spun around one hundred and eighty degrees. Becker found himself looking at the outline of a sliding metal shutter.

"What sort of a name is that? Kos-

dyne."

"It's the name I was given," Mr Kosdyne replied.

"Where are you from anyway? One of those new Baltic states?"

"Yes," Kosdyne nodded. "I'm from one of those new Baltic states."

"So the Hub is Baltic technology? Or Russian, maybe?" Becker mused.

"Maybe," said Kosdyne.

"Hey, I'm just making conversation," said Becker. "I think it's the least you can do, humour me in the moments before I'm about to watch my wife..."

Then, it all changed.

The cubicle and the chair remained as they were, but for an instant, it seemed to him, Becker was looking at a much taller man, at least seven and a half feet compared to the six of Kosdyne. His arms and legs were thinner, his face narrow almost to the point of caricature. His skin was not so much pale as translucent, and his eyes – now that was the strangest thing – they were larger, really, than they should have been, larger than any eyes Becker had ever seen before. And they were a dirty yellow. Becker thought of jaundice.

Disconcertingly, an insect-like thing the size of a cockroach, black and metallic, pushed itself out from under the man's right eyelid and began the journey down his long, long arm

towards his plate-like hand. Becker watched, fascinated, as the tiny machine reached the tall man's broad palm, then traversed the spidery fingers, crossing over them onto his own arm, from where it moved up towards his own face. It ascended his cheek, brushing his lips and nose, and Becker felt it as it began to probe with its tiny legs at the lid of *his* eye.

That was when he began to scream.

Then, it changed back.

Kosdyne stood over him in the cubicle, regarding him with curiosity. He was not so tall any more. His eyes were grey, not yellow. And there was no insectoid robot on Becker's face. None that he could feel.

"I..." said Becker.

"You saw something?" Kosdyne asked.

Becker nodded, unwilling to put it into words.

"Don't worry," the man said. "Sometimes it happens. There can be imperfections in the transference matrix. No technology is perfect."

"Imperfections in the *what*?"

"It's part of the process. Not of concern."

"Jesus." Becker laughed. "And I haven't had a drink in weeks. Hey..." The hallucination with the tall man and the mechanical bug, there had been a quality of *realness* about it which had him spooked. He felt uneasy. "This isn't going to hurt, is it?" he asked.

"Hurt?" said Kosdyne. "It will hurt a lot. In fact the pain will be unbearable."

Becker laughed again.

Kosdyne raised an eyebrow. "You are one who finds pain amusing until you feel it?"

"No, I am one who finds *you* amusing... You're kidding, right? Because that's what I'm here to get away from. Pain."

"The pain is intense," Kosdyne reiterated. "Nobody knows why. Something perhaps to do with the inherent resistance of the human psyche to such an invasive procedure. That is one theory. But research has been limited, because we do not care."

"I don't understand what you're talking about," Becker said, "but nobody told me there would be pain. If there's pain, the Hub should say. That's a given. If there's pain involved in the treatment, people should be told about it beforehand."

Mr Kosdyne looked back at him blankly. "But then who would come?" he said.

"This is stupid," said Becker. "You know there are people who want to shut this place down, right?"

"We know," Kosdyne nodded. "But Kosdyne wants this franchise kept open. It is doing very well."

"Franchise? What are you talking about? Look, I'm not sure about this. I might be changing my mind."

Becker tested the straps that held his arms and his head, but they were tight. He couldn't move. It didn't feel good. He began to panic.

"I can change my mind, can't I?"

"No, we can change your mind, Mr Becker." Mr Kosdyne moved his lips, as though he were trying to smile, but he wasn't getting it nearly right. "Don't worry, you won't remember it. The pain. Or the orb."

"The what?"

"Goodbye Mr Becker. And thanking you for choosing Hub

Station."

A light on the wall flashed blue, and the panel in front of Becker slid open. His chair tipped forward, though he didn't fall. He was held securely.

He looked out and down into a giant circular chamber, and he saw that, around its walls, a thousand other people, in a thousand identical chairs, were doing the same. And most of them were now beginning to scream. Becker did the same, as the mechanical cockroach deftly slid out between his eyelid and his eye and sat on his forehead, pulsing out a signal.

Down in the pit, the great black orb responded – to all one thousand signals – and from its shiny metallic skin sent out one thousand whip-like tentacles, one for each cubicle, one for each memory.

There was the sudden upwelling of sound as the hundreds of tendrils brushed against each other. A moment later, one snaked into Becker's cubicle, hovering before him like a finger in the air before darting towards his face. He flinched as it slithered into his nose, and he acknowledged that Mr Kosdyne had not been lying. The pain was like nothing he had ever felt before. Surely he would not forget it. How could anyone? This depth of agony must necessarily be seared onto his soul for all time.

But then, oddly, it had passed, and he was in the car, laughing with Anna as they took the turn by the tall pines. He bent to change the CD in the player, heard her warning cry too late, felt a chill of certainty as the truck came screaming up the hill towards them.

THE CAFE WAS crowded. They had been lucky to get a table at all, but had at last found one empty in the corner, cramped and half hidden behind a pillar.

Molly sat opposite, drinking black coffee. She looked tired, but she looked good, he thought. She looked very good. Which made it all the worse.

"I'm sorry, Becker," she was saying. "It's over."

"I don't understand," he said. "I'm not drinking. I'm all right."

He thought maybe she was trying not to cry.

"You don't get it, do you? You're not him any more. You're not the Becker I met in Chaney's."

"But I am."

"Goodbye, Becker."

She stood up and left before he could voice another protest, turning and walking quickly away through the tables and out the door.

He watched her go, then reached into his jacket pocket. He pulled out the candy bar, tearing off the blue-on-blue wrapper and dropping it onto the floor. It was his last one. The taste of the chocolate had been odd at first, but now he was getting used to it: strange and rich and deep, and somehow bittersweet. It reminded him of something, he was sure it did, but try though he might, he couldn't quite place it.

As for Molly, that hurt. That hurt a lot.

But he knew now, that was a pain he didn't have to feel.

> Antony Mann's short stories have appeared in *Crimewave*, *Interzone*, *The Third Alternative* and *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* among others. After fifteen years in Oxford he recently went back home to live in Australia. It's much warmer there. Though the beer is not so nice.

CHIEF ENGINEER CHANDI KANE, FOUR-OH-FOUR-SIX-OH-Six, making Verbal Report on recent and I say avoidable loss of Appliance named Hector ridden by Local Application 13-13 during subsurface exploration of Jupiter's moon Europa.

This report for immediate and urgent attention of Joint Chiefs of Staff. November Sixteenth, Twenty Sixty-Eight A.D.

Though you're never going to hear this, are you? Because it'll never make it that far up the chain of command. Because who is ever going to listen to me? I mean - *me*? Chandi Kane. "Insane Chandi Kane."

Cut last para, and continue -

Mr Chairman, Mr Vice-Chairman, gentlemen. This is not about me. I know it's going to seem that way, but whatever has happened in my personal life recently has nothing to do - nothing at all to do with what I believe is a very important discovery.

If you'll excuse me, I'll need to give you a background briefing first, then you'll see my line of argument.

Application 13-13 - everyone who works on her calls her Lucky, for pretty obvious reasons - Application 13-13 became operational fifty years six months ago. She has done ten different tours of duty in widely varying terrains. Her first time out was some basic mineral extraction stuff on the moon. That must have been pretty boring for software of her size and complexity, but she performed faultlessly. Please take note of that. Faultlessly.

the MELANCHOLY

TOBY LITT

> Toby Litt grew up in Amptill, Bedfordshire. He is the author of two collections of short stories and nine novels including *Journey into Space* and *King Death*. His story 'John and John' won the 2009 Manchester Fiction Prize. 'The Melancholy' was originally broadcast on Radio 4. Visit Toby's website at tobylitt.com.

HOLY



Each time an Application finishes a tour, they are beamed back to Earth as a speed-of-light infostream. And all of the valuable operational experience that has been gained – we call it their ‘chops’ – that comes back, too.

But, and now this is important – this is really the thing – every time 13-13 came back, she wasn’t distributed or networked in any way. Of course, we wanted to analyse the changes in her – see if there was anything we could learn. But the founders of the program discovered early on that it was important to keep each Application separate from all the others, and from info in general. So what they did was, they gave each of them a physical form on Earth – a Tank they could inhabit so they could keep moving, keep perceiving.

When I first saw it, Lucky’s Tank was a big old heap of a thing which spent most of its time in storage out in this big facility – the peristyle – here in Greenland. And when 13-13 came back, every five years, she rode that very same Tank until she was ready to be beamed off to wherever her next tour of duty was.

I came on board the 13-13 maintenance team just before she returned from her seventh tour. I can remember how excited we were as the last terabytes came through, and we were able to activate the Tank. You see, the team all liked 13-13. It may not appear to be very scientifically rigorous, but it’s hard not to give each Application a personality. And I’d been told by the others 13-13 was something special, and I was lucky to be working on her.

As soon as she started to ride the Tank, I could see how graceful she was. Her movements were maybe a little slower than an average Application, but always very efficient, very considered. This made our lives a whole heap easier. Some of the Applications develop a style that gets stuff done extremely fast but is so herky-jerky that they’re going to shake their Appliance, their off-world Tank, to pieces in two or three years. You could tell Lucky wasn’t like that. She was kind of a dancer, which isn’t what you’d say for most of these robots.

I’ve worked on lots of other Applications in my career, but Lucky has always remained my favourite. I felt we were safe with her. She would never go haywire and crush us.

For 13-13’s interface, the original designer used his daughter’s voice. She spoke very clearly, in an old-fashioned way, and that seemed to fit 13-13’s character, too.

By now you’ve probably dismissed me as any kind of a reliable witness. But I’m talking here about some very sophisticated machinery. Systems which have been able to refine themselves and evolve over years of intense in-the-field operability.

Sometimes, I’d be alone with Lucky, working on installing the new graces and flows, and I would hear her making noises. It wasn’t exactly music, more like very complicated rhythms going clickety-click-click. When I asked her to explain, it turned out she’d been using some of her spare capacity to run up through the irrational numbers. What I liked was that she wasn’t doing this as fast as she could have done. She was savouring it; using it as background music. To her it was like humming would be to you. I never knew another Application do anything like that. 13-13 was quirky.

We sent her off for her eighth tour, for another five years away. A lot can happen in that time. I met someone, fell in love, got married, had my baby, Vishnu – and I was promoted, of course. And when 13-13 got back, I didn’t spend so much time with her.

But, to me, she seemed just the same – graceful, considerate.

We’d had to do some work on her Tank. It was getting so old that we’d needed to replace whole chunks of it, just so it would move. Even in a low humidity atmosphere, there’s corrosion. Over the years, piece after piece of the original Tank had been exchanged for something new – better alloy, better functionality. There was maybe five per cent left of what she’d started with. We’re getting to the crucial point here.

Ten years ago, we beamed her off – had a party, wished her well. And then, when she was due to return again, we went over her Tank once more – refitting it for our favourite baby.

It’s only with the spare time I’ve had in the past few months that I’ve worked out the really important thing. By the time 13-13 came back the last time, there wasn’t a single component left in the Tank that had been there in the beginning. I really think this must have meant something to her.

I mean, 13-13 didn’t mention it, but I’m convinced she must have noticed. Because it took her a whole day before she even made a movement. It was like she was trying to find a hint of the old stuff in amongst all the new. Even though, for an Application as fast as her, she could have worked that out in a millisecond. I think she was hoping we’d been kind, and left her just a little piece of herself – a badge or a rivet or a wire; some arrangement of atoms to give her continuity. You may think this is nonsense, but it’s what I’ve come to believe, thinking it over.

We sat around for twenty-four hours, waiting for Lucky to do something. And even though the Tank hadn’t moved, I swear there was an atmosphere in the hall – like the great metal thing was brooding. The peristyle felt completely different from a week before, when we were prepping everything, and 13-13 was still beaming back.

When she finally did move, it pretty soon became obvious that 13-13 had changed. For the first time ever, I saw her be clumsy. Her walk wasn’t pretty any more. She didn’t hurt anyone or hit anything, but a couple of times she scraped bits of herself up – took the edges off her caterpillar tracks. And, when there wasn’t anything going on, she would pick at herself. I’ve never seen anything like it. It was like she was starting to feel itchy inside.

The whole team observed this, but there really wasn’t anything we could do about it. Our job was just to get her ready for her next tour as fast as possible. Europa is a pretty hostile environment. And for most of the time, there’s no contact with Earth at all – Lucky was going to be deep beneath the surface, without a relay. Her task was to map ice-fields that change almost by the hour. It’s never ending, down there in the dark, but the geologists are starting to get a sense of how the place works – its rhythms.

We beamed 13-13 off to her brand new Tank, had the usual party when she went subsurface – and that’s the last we ever heard of her.

That was five years and six months ago. Like I said, a lot of things can happen in that time. I fell out of love, got divorced, Vishnu got ill and didn’t get better, I fell in and out of love again. And, I have to say, I was expecting to spend a lot of time alone with Lucky when she got back home. It would be something to do with myself. By the start of this year, I’d risen to heading up the team. I knew her better than anyone else. Now it was me telling beginning engineers how special Lucky was. How they were lucky to be working on her.

The day she failed to reestablish contact, we were really astonished. Appliances do get lost, now and again, but very rarely on somewhere like Europa. It's minus one hundred and fifteen degrees and total darkness, but there aren't any volcanoes or anything. If she'd been in mechanical trouble, 13-13 would have returned straightaway to the surface.

So, they sent another Appliance to look for her. That was six months ago. They never found a trace.

I think you'll probably have guessed where this is headed. And I know what you're going to come back at me with. Yes, I did try to commit suicide a month after 13-13 failed to return. I took her disappearance very hard. I did not like the idea of all that empty time ahead of me, when I should have been helping improve her and record her and learn from her. My suicide attempt was serious. I was only prevented by the compassionate notice of my colleagues. I am grateful to them for saving me for life. And I feel that I am now fully recovered.

I therefore do not believe that I am projecting my own psychological state onto Lucky. But I am definitely asserting that what she did, on discovering she no longer had a home-body to return to, was make a rational decision. She decided at the very least that her new Appliance was the only real home she would ever have. So, she decided to stay in it. Which, in a hostile environment like Europa, where Appliances are designed to last twenty years maximum, amounted to suicide. In fact, I believe that 13-13 somehow disposed of herself as soon as she went beneath the surface of Europa. My suspicion is that she set off towards the moon's iron core and kept going until she found a place where ice was forming rapidly, and she got herself frozen in. She may

still be there, counting up through the irrational numbers, or she may have been crushed flat, but she's never coming back.

You probably think I am unbalanced, or just plain wrong, but I assure you, gentlemen, you will never hear from 13-13. All the work and resources we invested in her have been lost – all the love, too.

And, yes, we do have an up-to-date backup of her. We have two backups housed in separate locations. And one of these is being sent off for a new term of duty in twenty-four hours. But I've been watching this Lucky riding her Tank, and she's pitiful. She brooded for a day when we saddled her up. She's been scraping herself against anything she can find. She's picking at her surfaces. And I guarantee, in five years' time, you'll be wondering where this one's gotten lost, too.

That's why I've been trying to track down the scrapped parts of her original Tank. I thought that if I could find just one piece of it, and reinstall it, then this version of Lucky would sense that – and she'd be reconciled. Even the ID badge would have been enough. But it turns out we engineers are very efficient: every atom of the original Lucky has been melted down, made into something else.

I've spent a lot of time, sitting here with 13-13, alone, in this big echoey hall. And I can see it inside her, all over her – the melancholy.

And I'm not just seeing myself; I promise you, I'm not.

This really isn't about me.

It's about her.

She's lost herself.

She's gone.

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Rochita Loenen-Ruiz

ALTERNATE GIRL'S EXPATRIATE LIFE

IN SPRINGTIME, HER GARDEN YIELDED A HUNDRED WISTERIA BLOSSOMS. White English roses climbed the pergola. *Digitalis purpurea*, lavender from the South of France, mint and thyme, rosemary and tarragon, basil and sweet marjoram – they all grew in Alternate Girl's one hundred percent super-qualified housewife garden.

Across the street, excavators dug up large swathes of grass.

"They're building a new complex over there," her neighbor said. "I heard the farmer who owned that land went off to live the life of a millionaire."

Her neighbor babbled on about yachts and sea voyages and Alternate Girl stood there staring while the machines went about their business of churning up grass and soil. She wondered what it would be like to be crushed under those hungry wheels, and she flinched at her own imagination.

"A pity," her neighbor said. "I sure will miss the view."

Alternate Girl murmured something vague in reply, and went back to tending her flowers.

She wondered if the farmer was happier now that he had his millions. Would wealth and sea voyages make up for severed ties and the erasure of generations of familial history?

She pulled out a stray weed, and scattered coffee grinds to keep the cats from digging up her crocus bulbs.

She shook her head and headed back indoors. She'd only known two kinds of lives, and in neither of them had she been a millionaire.

> Rochita Loenen-Ruiz is a Filipina writer and mother living in The Netherlands. Her work has been published in a variety of online and print magazines both abroad as well as in her home country The Philippines, including *Weird Tales*, *Byzantium*, *The Sword Review*, *Reflection's Edge*, *Flash Me Magazine*, *Apex Magazine Online*, and *Fantasy Magazine*. She has co-authored an inspirational book, *Hope Away From Home*, released by OMFLit Philippines, and is a proud member of the Villa Diodati Workshop for expats in Europe.

Most expatriates pursue a model life. This makes them a desired member in their adopted society. They appear to assimilate quickly, adapting without visible complications to the customs of the country in which they reside.

On the surface, they may appear contented, well-adjusted, and happy. However, studies reveal an underlying sorrow that often manifests itself in dreams. In dreams, the expatriate experiences no ambivalent feelings. There is only a strong sense of loss. It isn't uncommon for expats to wake up crying.

— *On Expatriate Behavior* by Mackay & Lindon

IN HER DREAMS, Alternate Girl fled from her life as an expat. She sprouted wings and let the wind take her back to the gates of her hometown.

Even in the dreamscape she could smell the exhaust from passing jeepneys. She could taste the metal dust in the air. The moon shone on the gentle curve of asphalt, cutting through dusty thoroughfares, creating long dark shadows on the pavement. Metal tenements jutted up out of the land, pointing like fingers at the night sky.

By day, a constant stream of drones strove to keep those buildings together. Every bit of scrap metal, every piece of residual wiring was used to keep the landscape of steel and concrete from breaking to pieces. For all its frailty, for all of its seeming squalor, there was something dear and familiar about the way the streets met and turned into each other.

Even if her life was filled with the coziness of here and now, she could not shake off the longing that thrummed through her dreams in the same way that the thrum of the equilibrium machine pulsed through this landscape.

Towering above the tenements was the Remembrance Monument. Made of compressed bits and parts, it contained all the memories of those gone before. Each year, the Monument reached higher and higher until its apex was lost in the covering of clouds. When she was younger, she'd often imagined she could hear the voices of the gone before.

Above the pulse of the Equilibrium Machine, above the gentle susurrus of faded ghosts, she heard a cry. High and shrill, it emitted a hopelessness Alternate Girl remembered feeling.

It was the same cry that pulled her out of her dreams back into the present. She turned on her side, pressed her ear against her pillow, and stared into the darkness.

This is my home now, she told herself. I am happy as I am. We are happy as we are.

Never mind her personal griefs. Never mind her longing for that lost landscape.

WOULD YOU LIKE a chance to revisit the past or to visit the future? Optimum Labs offers you the chance to take the leap in time. Our company is 100% customer satisfaction guaranteed. Unlike other scams out there, Optimum labs offers you the real thing.

Alternate Girl stared at the screen. Each day the spam mails showed up without fail. Same time stamps, same recipient name, all from anonymous senders.

Who sent these mails? And did everyone in her neighborhood receive the same mail with the same time stamps every day? If she had the courage to reply, would she receive an answer from all the anonymous senders? Her hand hovered over the delete key. If you sent garbage to the landfill, it got buried underground, but what about garbage in the ether? Did it float around silently on the airwaves? Would all the spam and the deleted mail come back to haunt her in the form of ether pollution or some such specialized name?

While she sat there, the speakers gave off a faint ping. She clicked and waited as the new message filled her screen.

Happy Birthday, Alternate Girl! Today, is a milestone for all of us. You have successfully completed one hundred weeks of expatriate life. In recognition of your hard work, a reward has been issued to you at the designated station. Report in as soon as you

can and don't forget to register at our renewed website. Greetings from Memomach@metaltown.com.

Alternate Girl squeezed her eyes shut. She opened them and stared once more at the message on her screen. Could it be what she had been waiting for all this time or was Mechanic finally calling her home?

Most expatriates express mixed feelings regarding their origin. Many of them harbor a secret fear of losing touch with the collective memory. While they seem content with their new lives, repatriation is a common subject of conversation. For the expatriate, to return raises a complex response.

One of the subjects of this study worded it this way: "Return is something I fantasize about and desire. But at the same time, it is something I am afraid of."

Choosing to build a new life in an unfamiliar land represents a leaving behind of the collective, and while there may still be remnants of a shared life, the expatriate faces uncertainty. What if he or she has lost the ability to pick up the threads of the old life?

— *On Expatriate Behavior* by Mackay & Lindon

HER FIRST RECOLLECTION was of Father's eyes shining down at her from his great height. Light filtered in through drawn shades and she could see an outline of buildings from where she lay. It seemed as if there were a thousand busy bees buzzing inside her skull. Beside her, someone moaned. She shivered and echoed the sound.

"There, there," Father said. "No need to be frightened. Father," he said, pointing to himself. "Metal Town." He gestured to something beyond her vision.

She repeated the words after him, and listened as he murmured sounds of approval.

"You're progressing very well," he said. "Soon, I'll take you to the Mechanic."

He shuffled away out of her line of sight. She heard a thump and another moan, and she called out anxiously. "Father?"

"I'm here," Father said. His voice was soothing and she drifted away into a kaleidoscope of screeching metal and the crescendo of another voice wailing out Father's name.

When she woke up, the curtains were drawn back. From where she was, she could see black metal struts and the carcasses of vehicles piled up on top of one another.

From far away, came the hum of lasers and a low bass thrum which she later discovered was the Equilibrium Machine. A man bent over her; his face was shiny and round and she saw metal cogs where his ears should have been.

His fingers felt cold and hard on her skin.

"Just like one of them," he whispered. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were one of them."

His words made her uncomfortable, and when he took her hand she pulled it away.

"Don't fight it," he whispered. "Fighting only makes it worse."

She felt something sharp and burning on her skin. Wet leaked out of her eyes. She couldn't move.

"You'll be fine," he said. "It's all part of the process."

STARING AT THE message on her screen, she wondered if Mech-

anic considered this as yet another part of the process.

"Leaving is a part of the process," Father had said. "While we may long for return, we also know that having left we are already changed."

She looked around at her cozy nest, stared at the brilliant blues and greens of her living room, at the paintings of sunflowers and butterflies, and she wondered whether she would be able to go back and surrender to a life spent waiting for harvest.

Outside, the digging machines had fallen silent. She looked up at the clock. It was half past twelve and the men who drove them were probably off to lunch.

Extract from notes on the creation of Alternate Girl:

2001 hours: Original model expired at 2000 hours. Harvested from prototype AG 119-2: pulsebeat, bodyframe, eyes, memory, emo chip.

2021 hours: Applied Mechanic's new plastics to bodyframe. Installed chip, memory, pulsebeat, eyes. Molding of face follows, arms, legs, and other parts. Assembly proceeded as planned. Pliables applied.

2065 hours: Awareness installed. Test successful.

2070 hours: Emo chip installed. Test successful.

2098 hours: Memory chip activated. Trace and recall function activated. Registration complete.

THERE WAS A party when she passed the 4000 hour mark. Father beamed, and Mechanic looked happy and hopeful. Metal Town's citizens came in reply to Mechanic's summons. Of these, she loved most the ones who rolled in on lopsided wheels and who smiled and chirped code at her.

When she tried to chirp back, they encircled her and projected their enthusiasm in signals and bleeps that she couldn't put into proper words.

"You are one of us," the chirpers said. And she felt welcomed and included.

Father beamed at the compliments he received. "Yes, I am proud of her," he said.

"Our first success," Mechanic said.

Alternate Girl wondered at his words. Had there been others then? If she was the first success, where were the ones that had failed?

The chirpers moved away and she was surrounded by tall and gangly ones who took her hands in theirs. They ran their fingers up and down her arms, peered into her eyes, and asked her questions about her training.

Mechanic beamed and looked on. He sipped oil from a can he held in his hand and bowed his head and gestured towards her.

Where were the words to tell a powerful being that you had no wish to be looked upon and admired as if you were a foreign object placed on display?

Foreign. It struck her then. She lifted her hands, marvelling at the elasticity of her flesh. Of course, she was foreign.

Notes on progression:

AG 119-2 perfectly adjusted. All systems normal. Social skills optimal. Sequence failures, nil.

IN THE WEEKS that followed she passed through various tests.

A model housewife, she learned, was dedicated to maintaining a perfect home and garden. She perused hundreds of pages of magazines culled from god knew where. Housewives by the hundreds, all extolling the virtues of various cleaning products, household goods, cooking sauces, oils, liniments, lotions, facial creams, garden products and intimate apparel. The array of faces and products dazzled her.

"Will there be others like me?" she asked Father.

"If all goes well," he replied.

"What about you?" she asked.

"When the time comes, the old must give way to the new."

She waited for him to continue. Wanting to know more, wanting to understand what he meant by his words.

"You're not old," she said.

He touched her cheek and shook his head. "I shall tell you more soon," he said.

These hours spent with Father were precious to her. He was patient with her attempts to put into practice the things she learned.

"You must learn control," he said. "You are far stronger than others think you are, but control will serve you better where you are going, A.G."

"WHEN THEY TAKE me away," Father said, "I want you to remember that it's part of the process we all go through."

"Why would they take you away?" she asked.

"In the order of things, old models must give way for the new," Father said. "But even if I go, my pride and joy live on in you, A.G. Eight thousand hours old and going strong. You are our future."

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"I'll be there," Father said. He pointed to the Remembrance Monument. "When the time comes, I will be harvested as others have been before me. My memories will become part of the Monument. There are those who say that when the end of time comes, we will unfold our bodies, regain our memories and find ourselves changed into something more than machine."

"Will I be harvested too?" she asked.

"I don't know." He cupped her face in his hands. "You are our first success. We don't even know what you'll be like when you're as old as we are."

"Can I have your memories?" she asked.

He didn't answer. Outside, Mechanic's men tramped through the streets of Metal Town. Someone screamed. *Harvest*. The word whispered through Alternate Girl's circuits.

Father flinched, closed his eyes and bowed his head.

"Will it hurt?" Alternate Girl asked.

"I don't know," Father replied.

But she knew he was lying. She wondered what happened at Harvest and whether it was indeed a natural thing as Father said.

She visited the Remembrance Monument, and tried to make

sense of it all. Its cold walls gave back a reflection of her face – so unlike the faces of her fellow citizens. She thought of a life without Father, and there were no words for the grief she felt.

"Take me then," she said to the Monument. "If you must take Father, then you must take me too."

But the Monument stayed silent, and no matter how hard she listened, there were no messages or codes from the beyond.

AFTER THAT, SHE grew more conscious of how the machine men made their daily trek to the walled buildings. They went in the same as they went out. The drones monitored the streets, gathering up residue and scrap metal. It seemed to her that each one had a duty to perform, a routine task to follow.

Mechanic had found no routine for her yet.

"Learn all you can," he said on one of his visits. "You will be our first ambassador. The model housewife, a perfect expatriate. They will love us because of you. Perhaps they will finally remember us and we will be reconciled to the original makers."

"What about Father?" Alternate Girl asked.

"He does his part," Mechanic said. "You must do yours."

She didn't like the uncertainty of his answer, but she had learned not to say so. Instead, she nodded and listened and took in the knowledge he fed to her.

There must be a way out, she thought.

It was the first time she thought of escape.

The Expatriate Choice as subject of this study reveals the following common causes for expatriation:

Economic. Some expatriates choose to live or work in a different country or society for the sake of material gain.

Social. Some expatriates choose to live or work in a different country or society because they see this as a means of increasing their stature in society. Others choose exile for the sake of love.

Political. Some expatriates embrace voluntary exile as a means of protest against the ruling body of their home country.

— *Observations of Expatriate Behavior* by Mackay & Lindon

ALTERNATE GIRL FOUND the rift in the barrier a week after Mechanic's visit. It was late at night, and she had chosen to take one of the roads leading South. She ventured further and further away from the heart of Metal Town. The moon cast its light on the road before her and she could see the long shadow of herself stretching out and mingling with the waving shapes of wild grass and brush.

She was deep in thought when the sound of wheels swishing on asphalt caught her attention. She saw a flash of light, and then she was at a barred gate. Through the bars, she could see the outline of cars and buses flowing in a rush away from her. She stared at this vision of vibrant and full-bodied creatures, and she understood that they were relatives of the disemboweled who lay stranded in the many garages around Metal Town.

On her way home, she was conscious of the spy eye stationed atop the Remembrance Monument, and passing close to it, she heard a faint murmur like voices whispering through the scaffolds of the Monument's steel ports.

The recollection of screams played back in her memory and she stopped. One day, they would take her too. She'd be joined

to the Monument regardless of whether she desired it or not.

Across the street, she saw the Mechanic. Moonlight glinted off the chrome of his head, and he gave a slight nod when he saw her. She could hear him muttering to himself as he crossed to where the tin houses of the Numbered Men leaned against each other like pale reflections of their owners.

Alternate Girl wished she had the courage to run up to Mechanic. "Please," she would say. "Please spare Father."

But she already knew his answer.

"Our duty is to the original creators of the Monument," he'd told her once. "It is our task to harvest the bodies and to store the memories of the gone before. It is all for the greater good, Alternate Girl. We all have our duties to perform. Your father understands his place in all of these."

Memory, its storage and the passing on of it, is essential to the inhabitants of Metal Town. What function does the Remembrance Monument have if not to store the memories of the gone before? At the heart of Harvest is the preservation of the spirit that is Metal Town.

— *A Celebration of Memory* by Sitio Mechanics

FATHER WAS SILENT. He dragged his feet when he walked and complained about his joints. She tried to cheer him up, but all the while, her mind circled around the question of escape.

"They'll be coming for me soon," Father said. His speech slurred and he sat down and leaned his head against the back of the chair. "Mechanic wants to create a partner for you," he whispered. "He wants someone created in your image. An alternate man designed to fit the perfect housewife."

"Father..." She knelt down beside him. "If I told you we could get out and not have to come back, what would you say?"

He laughed. "Don't you think anyone has tried that before? Why do you think the Monument keeps growing, A.G.? Our masters created us to stay in Metal Town, but there were always those who tried to escape. Everyone comes back to Metal Town, even those who leave with the Mechanic's blessing."

"But there's a road out of here," Alternate Girl insisted. "If we leave, at least we'll have a choice."

"They'll always catch you," he whispered. "Metal Town allows no exemptions, A.G. Right now, you are one of a kind, but what's been made before can be made again."

He closed his eyes, and leaned back in his chair. She could hear the slow whirl of his heart, and she felt more frightened than she had ever been.

"Why did you make me this way?" she asked. "You could have made me a drone, if this is all the life I'm meant to have."

"Do you think a drone's life is of less value than yours?" Father asked. "Memory and hope is all that lies between you and the life of a Numbered Man. We come home when our time is at end. To be joined to the original dream of our creators is a privilege, not a curse."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm sorry, Father. I didn't mean for it to sound that way. But please, please, won't you at least try? Without you, I might just as well be a Numbered Man."

"Escape is never without price," Father said.

But she only heard the capitulation in his voice.

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Copy of memo lifted from Mechanic's desk:

Received: 23:11, Remembrance Monday

Re: Circular number 792-A-1B3RAE

Release Request: Alternate Girl

Status: Under consideration

THEY LEFT METAL Town early in the morning. In the quiet dark, the thrum of the Equilibrium Machine was magnified a hundred times. Avoiding the street lamps, they kept to the shadows as best as they could.

"I'll slow you down," Father had said.

But she wouldn't leave him behind. And so, they crept along behind the piles of junk and strip metal.

Their feet slipped on smooth steel and made clunky sounds in the silence. They waited, but when no one came, they slid on forward until they reached a surface less finished than the one they'd left behind.

"We're almost there," she whispered.

She could hear his joints creak in the silence, and she reached out a hand to help him.

"I'm fine," he said.

And then they were out in the open. Beyond them, the road opened up and curled southwards to where the rift in the barrier had expanded.

The rising sun cast a golden glow over Father's face, and it seemed like he was made of light.

They were headed towards the rift when from behind came the sound of pursuit. The roar of the Mechanic and the clunk of boots on the hard surface of the road.

They raced down the blacktop as the sun made its journey to the apex. Alternate Girl ran, propelling Father onwards with a fresh surge of energy. The earth shook, and Alternate Girl slipped and lost her footing.

"Get up," Father's voice whispered in her ear.

"Run," Alternate Girl gasped. "I'll slow them down."

"I'm not letting them take you," Father said.

The Equilibrium Machine shrieked, and Alternate Girl cried out as Mechanic loomed before them.

"WHAT DID YOU think to gain?" Mechanic asked.

What had I hoped for? Alternate Girl wondered.

"Let her go," Father said. "I will do as is required of me. Only let her go."

"Do you think you still have the power to intervene?" Mechanic asked. He kept his gaze locked on Alternate Girl.

"No," Father said. "I realize there is no forgiveness for what I chose to do. Still -"

Mechanic raised his right hand in a silencing gesture. "Forgiveness is not up to you to decide," he said. "Whatever follows lies in the hands of this girl you have created. She is ready to leave this place, and I am sure she will be an asset to the Expatriate Program."

Building bridges and abolishing barriers is central to the Expatriate Program. Ignorance leads to misconceptions and stereotypes, hence the lumping together of certain groups of expatriates. It is hoped that the Expatriate Program will give

rise to mutual understanding and acceptance of each other's differences.

Participants to the Expatriate Program are given the freedom to appropriate what they deem necessary in order to achieve the central goal of mutual integration.

— *Understanding the Expatriate Program* by Mackay & Hill

SHE'D FOUND HER partner on the other side of the gate. It had seemed simple enough to follow him home and to allow herself to be embraced and joined to him. That union made it possible for her to slip seamlessly into the pattern of his everyday life.

All the knowledge fed into her came to good use, and their lives entwined as if by rote. She became the housewife, and he, her model mate.

How he spent his days was a mystery to her. She imagined him spending all day behind a desk in an office somewhere. She thought of him lost in a maze of paperwork, one of the hundreds of thousands of Numbered Men wearing the same colored shirt, the same suit from the same local haberdashery, the same haircut from some local barber, the same coat, the same tie. She imagined all of them, working together towards the same goal.

How many numbers have you added up today? That's how Alternate Girl imagined their conversations went. *How many more numbers before you meet your quota?*

"IF I DO as you wish, will you return Father to me?" she asked Mechanic.

"Already his body is good for nothing but the harvest," Mechanic said. "But I can give you the essence of him. How you choose to restore him lies within your grasp."

She turned the chip over in her hand. For all that it seemed small, it contained the entirety of Father's memories as well as the history of their lives.

"A simple matter to appropriate a body," Mechanic's words whispered in her head. "You won't even need to tell him what you're doing. Let him fall away into an eternal dream, so Father may return."

"Won't he feel pain?" she asked.

"A relative thing," he said. "Such things are unimportant and the outcome relies on your ability to do what must be done. You have done well, A.G. Allowing you to regain Father is a small reward."

The chip felt hard and hot in her hand. She'd sacrificed towards this goal, subjugated her will in order to build a life beyond the shadows of the Remembrance Monument. Already she couldn't remember the name of this man with whom she'd shared a bed for one hundred weeks.

Should she feel regret or remorse for what she was about to do?

She had no answer to that question. All she could think of was Mechanic's admonition; she could only hear his voice telling her that she was free to do as she chose. If she chose to erase her partner's life for the sake of regaining Father, it wouldn't matter if she could no longer return to Metal Town.

She listened to her partner's key turning in the front door, listened to the sound of his footsteps in the hall, listened for the familiar creak of his joints, and turned to welcome him home. ■



ORCHESTRAL MANOEUVRES IN THE DARK MATTER BY JIM HAWKINS



MIKE

TRACKING ID 0XFE69D

They always did it when I wanted a piss. I'd just got the zipper down and was on my side in the trench when the next attack wave came. This time it was twenty foot wide spider things with eyes on stalks that could look or shoot or both at the same time. Kovak aimed his weapon and said something that sounded a bit like "fuck your mother" but was probably the name of a Polish saint.

The spiders spat stuff that looked like luminous green snot out of their eyes. The snot balls rose over the trench and exploded. Kovak rolled to the right and I rolled to the left as streamers of incandescent spider nose-stuff fell from above into the trench.

I hate night vision goggles. They're bad at the best of times, but you try focusing giant spiders in shaky green light when all you really want is to have a piss and clear off somewhere else.

On the other hand, I liked Kovak. Socially he was a disaster to have around. Even the most desperate woman wouldn't come within several hundred yards if you had this lumbering thing anywhere near you. He was big, he was ugly, and his English consisted almost entirely of "Yeah, love you baby, more vodka." He was a bit too fond of hugging. He hugged his buddies. He hugged barmen. He hugged waiters. And he tried really hard to hug anything on high heels wearing a tube top that came within range. He was a walking exclusion zone.

Being in a wet trench was not a social event, and that's where Kovak came into his own. Getting laid is one thing, but getting dead is another. If I wanted to get under the sheets I'd give Kovak a handful of vouchers for cut-price vodka in a store fifty miles way. Here, I wanted destruction.

Kovak looked across and raised three fingers. I nodded. He reached down to his belt and unclipped a couple of fragmentation grenades. We'd done similar things before, but you couldn't do the same thing twice. The enemy was smart. They watched the replays. I checked the charge on the gun and waited.

Down the trench the spiders were moving forward, slurping green stuff over cowering conscripts.

Kovak raised one finger, and we were off. We jumped out of the trench and ran through the legs of the spiders. He threw grenades and I shot upwards into a spider belly. He was screaming something that was probably a Polish curse, or a recipe for meat balls, who the fuck knew, and I was just screaming. Somewhere in the universe maybe there's a scrap yard full of heaped up spider parts, and if there wasn't, we'd just made one.

We circled back and took out the spiders who were glooping on the other terrified troops. I stood and pissed on the smoking remnants. You haven't been there. You don't know. Tell you what, though. You need Kovak by your side, and for a few minutes you can actually love the guy. He is nothing but war, but war is what we are.

andante

When we're not doing this stuff, I'm Principal Oboe in an orchestra and Kovak is Third Horn. Like a lot of horn players Kovak suffers from tinnitus. They claim it's because they've got the tymps just behind them and if you get to the end of Mahler 9 with your hearing intact you're doing well. They do have a point. Kovak has the hots for Cherry Rogers. She's buried somewhere in the depths of the second violins. I know you'll think I'm dissing her as just average string-scraping pond life, so if you want I'll pretend she's been the CEO of several multinationals, has loads of degrees, founded MENSAs, solved a variety of previously undiscovered facets of string theory, started her own chain of shops, was an intelligent TV chat show host, and is in heavy demand as a bridge designer. Maybe that will get me past the Gender Studies checklist.

Cherry never wanted to do any of those things, because she's quite happy being a violinist. Kovak thinks she's the most beautiful thing he's ever seen, but then Kovak is a brass player. Yes I know you're going to scream *stereotype* but my experience is (counting for nothing in the great schema of academic criticism) that brass players like to have a drink before, during, and after a gig. I am proud to have been made an honorary brass player.

Let's be fair – Cherry is an averagely nice looking violinist. Even that sounds patronising. I'll start again before the academics start on me. Cherry is entirely and utterly her confident self. She wears her acne with pride. And Kovak is in love with her. How can I possibly comment on Cherry's view of it all, because I'm a bloke, and therefore an unreliable witness?

scherzo

Hi. I'm Cherry. My parents wanted me to be a neurosurgeon or Prime Minister or both. When I said I wanted to be a violinist my best friends took me on one side and said I was failing the cause. Can I just say this? I never wanted to be anything else. I want to tell you I'm very happy just being part of the orchestra when we're playing Mozart. It's clean, it's clear; it's just what I am.

The last paragraph is basically the official line. I am a very

good violinist. Unofficially, I am also very good at killing things, and I like it. When you manipulate genes, for everything you put in you have to take something out. I got enhanced musical talent, enhanced killing skills, and zero conscience. They could have done better on the looks, but from their point of view acne plus violin equals credibility. I used to think they'd been mean with the tits, but when you have to run flat out across the killing ground you really don't want a lot of stuff flapping around. They always get that wrong in Spy Videos. Have you ever seen a marathon runner who needed to strap it all in? Most of those ludicrous D-Cups wouldn't make it across a car park without smacking themselves in the nose.

I know Kovak is in love with me, but I think I could do a lot better if I decided to switch out of gay for a bit. Would you really want to go out with a brass player? Sometimes when he splits a note he looks over at me with a little boy lost look and I want to hug him but I can't because I'd have a dozen texts telling me I was falling into a caring, submissive role, and that would be terribly bad news. Shostakovich I can deal with, but lunch with the girlfriends is too much.

allegro marcato

There we were in the trench again with the red flares falling on their little parachutes, our fatigues damp up to the crotch, and frankly I couldn't give a fuck. Kovak was in a seriously bad mood because he maybe shouldn't have had that extra swift one in the interval and he came in a bar early in the Beethoven. He got a mega bollocking from the Orchestral Manager for that and he's on a warning.

I think they're starting to get it right. Tonight they sent over a lot of puzzling grey cubes and about a million ladybirds. We'd poured a lot of heavy fire into the cubes before we figured out that the really bad stuff was a cloud of cute red and black spotted beetles forming around your head and then exploding. Summer in the garden would never be the same again.

Kovak looked ridiculous, waving his arms around like our guest conductor. I can't tell you where the guest conductor comes from because although this is my story and my journal before very long some critics will turn up to complain that I'm being racist. Everything we do is scrutinised by critics. They sit in the fifth row of the concert hall. They are not required to play. Their only instrument is the nose down which they look. We are giving our four hundred and thirtieth rendition of the Enigma Variations and the coach is waiting in the windswept night outside to take us home. Notes are scribbled. It's too slow or too fast, too brassy or too mellow, Cherry and the other pond-life in the strings have not achieved the same tonal quality as a German orchestra paid eight times as much. Fuck off.

Critics are maggots feeding on what we blow, scrape, and bang our hearts out creating in gloomy cold concert halls up and down our dreary tour venue list, and what they write is at best maggot shit.

The troubling thing is that Thomasz Kovak and I, Mike Alexander, are critics of a sort. We only got into all this because we



turned out to have been given some special abilities. We divide our lives between Purcell, Bartok, Penderecki, and whatever military nightmares the other teams have come up with. We do the post-op debriefings, fill in the questionnaires, critique their concepts, and retire to the boozier and see what crazy scheme we can imagine. We don't know how many other teams there are in the orchestra, but we gave the ladybird concept a pretty high score.

You probably think this is just Virtual-Reality war-games. Yes, well, until recently it was. It's now gone a bit Actual Reality. There's a problem with VR. Deep down in the hippocampus or the cerebellum or somewhere, you know that it's VR, you know it's a game. You know the glasses, ear-plugs, and brain-sensors will come off whatever you do, so the panic and fear are about losing the game, not the fear of actually dying. A split note in VR is an edit. A split note here goes with you to the grave.

I've been teaching Kovak to swear in English, and he's coming on well. Just think of all those saints who didn't swear. Where are they now? Fucking dead. Swearing is a *sforzando* mark on the music. Swearing is *italics*. Swearing is bold. If you're one of those tossers who says swearing is a lazy use of language, I say go off into your bland mezzo-forte and try to remember that Thomasz Kovak and I go out several nights a week to defend your right to say "fuck" and we need an expletive now and then.

When I play oboe d'amore in Toru Takemitsu's *vers, l'arc-en-ciel, palma* I am surrounded by a web of pure luminous sound. I blow streamers of silver into clouds of subtly shifting acoustic vapour. Converging strings bring a shadow and I pinch my lips even tighter and send a golden arabesque up to challenge the shades. I aspire to purity.

You should hear Kovak play the horn solo in Messiaen's *Des canyons aux étoiles...* The first time I heard it I was close to tears. It was as near to perfection as it can get. He was only playing it because the first horn had a bad dose of "influenza", which was really a severe hangover and a spot of bottling-out after rehearsal, and, to be fair, a nasty tooth infection that needed root surgery. Kovak vanished for twenty-four hours. I was seriously worried about him. He'd either gone off to practise, or he'd gone off to kill himself.

He turned up with skin as grey as an elephant's stomach. His hands were trembling. He refused to speak. He was present but also absent. I could see that his lips were red and sore. He was a pile of human junk. And then he played. Not a single split, tone perfect, phrasing without fault. He was, to be accurate and not at all generous, immense.

So if you think we're just a couple of foul-mouthed losers with no vocabulary, I have to tell you that we are, at our best, engineers of the highest beauty mankind has aspired to, and it's a tough call. That's why we go out and get pissed, because if you start worrying about what Mozart would have thought, you'll be a jellyfish in the Sahara within seconds.

Have you ever contemplated the dimensionality of critics? This is so far unvisited science. Did critics emerge at the same time as stars after the Big Bang? Are critics by-products of supernovae? Were critics the second thing to crawl out of the primordial slime? Are there critics lurking in the gas-giants? Is there a Critical Law to equal Newton?

If we couldn't do the beauty I don't think we could do the brutality. Or is it the other way round?

crotchet = 96

MIKE

TRACKING ID OXFBEA93D

Before we boarded the starship we were obliged to give a rousing concert for the King. In case you're reading this in the past, I should tell you that the Monarch of Europe is a purely decorative title awarded every five years. What happens is, your DNA is scanned for appropriate characteristics: no hunchbacks, IQ in the 100 to 120 range, middle height. You need an adequate supply of arms and legs; a rule brought in after a Swedish amputee Queen fell over at a commemorative parade for the War Dead and made an unsightly mess of the wreaths. When all the relevant sieving has been done a lottery decides upon a group of potential incumbents. A live broadcast show resembling a cross between Miss World and The Eurovision Song Contest then puts the candidates to the sword of a public vote. This is a lengthy process, because the EU now encompasses Russia, all the ex-Soviet states like Armenia, North Africa from Morocco to Egypt, Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran and the Former United States of Palestine. Japan's application is still being considered.

Probability is an extraordinary thing. Despite this elaborate randomisation, 98% of Monarchs over a hundred years have come from France, Germany and Russia. A cynic might think that some old hegemony was fixing the odds, but we are assured that this not so. Sod it, who cares?

King Dairmid Kelly was an exception: twenty-one years old, red hair, broken nose, and a tendency to sing. He sat on a temporary throne carefully lit for the cameras in front of the transport shuttles that would take us to the vast collection of chambers, struts, fibre-optics, shields, water tanks and fusion drives that would transport us on our Cultural Mission to thirteen settler worlds around nearby stars.

Usual old story: the Settlers were up for declaring themselves independent, voting themselves a new Monarch, and then charging outrageous prices for the stuff we sent them there to get in the first place.

Solution: send the Orchestra out on a tour. Two hours of Beethoven and Harrison Birtwhistle and they'd stop rewriting Thomas Jefferson and realise how pathetically culturally immature they were, how second-rate. If that didn't work, there was always the interesting stuff in several sealed chambers of the starship.

large molto

MIKE

TRACKING ID OXFBEA7CI

One of the great things about interstellar space is that it's completely devoid of critics. The downside is that currently starships are long and thin, and you really can't get enough space for a symphony orchestra in one chamber. You would have thought that after about nine million performances of Beethoven's Ninth

we would know how to play it, but our far-east conductor was brought up in a country where dozens of people could live in a viola case, and he insisted that we had to rehearse, even if it meant splitting the orchestra up into small sections in bubbles wired for sound and vision.

There are times when I'm glad I'm not a brass player. The starship occasionally needed to stop its pseudo-gravity spin and go into periods of zero-gravity for maintenance (or who the fuck knows what?). Brass players produce a load of spit, which they eject from their instruments by pumping, shaking, upending or simply by gobbing it out now and then. They say it's mostly condensation and not spit, but they're lying bastards.

This is usually just a bad morning for the cleaners, but Kovak assures me that when you're in a rehearsal bubble and the flight deck decides to dump the gravity, what you have is a random weather system of saliva clouds. There is no escape. You're getting the result of long tuba B-flat in your face within seconds.

Oboe players are pretty well-suited for space. You see, when you play an oboe you have to hold a lot of air in your lungs and you can get enough carbon dioxide in there to make you pass out. You have to learn to breathe out before you breathe in. If you don't believe me, get a thick carpet before you start the lessons. Just trying to help.

I thought interstellar travel was boring until we reached Nova Terra 9 and I had to force myself to smile through the reception by the Cultural Committee. What is it with caviar? I mean, really? It tastes like rat bollocks soaked in piss. Then they put it on cutesy little biscuits and pass it around on silver platters like it's a big deal. A Cultural Committee is basically a collection of what they used to call star-fuckers, which is a bit ironic when you're a member of an interstellar orchestra.

This is a weird fucking place. They live in igloos. They build the things out of ice in the winter and then inject some gunk which locks the water molecules in place so that it stays bonded even in summer. I have to say, though, that although the concert hall felt like being trapped in a huge fridge-freezer it was acoustically excellent. It was an elongated dome of ice with coloured pigments trapped in fractal patterns and they had really done the business with the ambient sound. People who are lucky enough not to be musicians don't realise the difference an acoustic can make for the players. You need it coming back at you at precisely the right number of milliseconds to get the feedback which will lift you from ordinary to special. It's like an aircraft's wing.

I think she was called Marietta, but I can't be sure because there comes a point where you just can't ask again. She wasn't on the Cultural Committee (I have some pride), she was serving drinks, but the insides of her thighs were like silk and she had interesting Inuit eyes. The ice over her bed was polished until it was a kind of soft-focus mirror. She really appreciated my oboist's breath control. She cooked seal steaks for breakfast. Not bad for our first gig on the tour!

CHERRY
TRACKING ID 0XFBF2C

Hi. I took the call at 23:32 as the reception was ending. I'd been

wondering why a load of Eskimos were allocated to a desert world, but outside the temperature was minus twenty-five and dropping. There was ice on the seal ponds. The orbiting starship was a brilliant light in the sky and the shuttle was waiting in the huge Lacrosse field near the concert hall.

I didn't expect to see Kovak, but he was the only other passenger. I was wrapped up in layers of clothing, but he was wearing a short-sleeved shirt and no jacket, and didn't seem to be feeling the cold. What have they done to us?

There was no messing about. The shuttle docked in the bay, the hatch opened, and there was a body bag lying on the floor. Kovak gestured me to stay where I was. He went down the steps after they'd unfolded, lifted the bag, slung it over his shoulder, brought it back up into the shuttle, laid it gently on the floor, and said something like "porzadku." He smiled at me, and I smiled back in that limited kind of way that means a smile is not an invitation. The shuttle disengaged and slipped back down to the planet.

The shuttle's control panel had the words STEALTH MODE lit up on it.

Kovak plugged a small earpiece in and gestured to my head. "Ultra-band," he said. I plugged mine in and activated it. His voice was clear in my right ear when he said "Witaj," and I replied "Whatever." Kovak messed with the control panel for a few seconds.

"Are you getting me in English now?" he asked.

I nodded.

"There's quite a lot of latency on the interpretation software," he added. "If things get difficult let's use hand signals."

Nod.

"You could try talking to me, petal," he said.

I said, "Witaj," and he grinned, turned to the console and said, "Command: Kovak and Cherry in position. We're ready to move to't target."

I couldn't work out why the interpreting software had decided to give him a Yorkshire accent unless somewhere in the obscure past of its database Doncaster had been twinned with Gdansk or Aunt Bessie's Yorkshire Puddings had taken Warsaw by storm, but let it pass. There were more important things to worry about.

The view of the dark landscape on the wraparound exterior display moved slowly and we could see that we were descending from a few thousand feet towards ground level. The Chairman's house was a sprawling igloo complex on the outermost limits of the city. There was a huge lake patterned with ice floes, and on one of these were polar bear and a pile of red rope. I knew about this, suddenly. These subliminal briefings are horrible. You remember what you've never known. I'd rather remember that I've forgotten than just have this stuff. Memories are made of fuzzy-felt, but this stuff they just dump into you is like a brick.

Anyway – these post-Inuit settlers played a dangerous game where you had to race across a frozen lake jumping from ice floe to ice floe avoiding some lethal polar bears. All you had was a bag of fish and some rope. My artificial memory told me it was rumoured to be based on a long forgotten board game from Earth that was found in a snowdrift in Siberia. Yeah, right! Whatever, this lot here did it for real, and people died. When you looked down at it from a shuttle, though, you could see

that there really wasn't a lot of entertainment on a frozen desert world. I suppose after you've screwed your brains out for a few months and watched a stack of Vids, you really want go one-on-one with a polar bear and die in some ancestrally resonant cold water.

At least they weren't sentimental about the polar bears. I've never understood why some of my friends can go misty-eyed over fifteen hundred pounds of marauding killer just because they have furry white coats. The Inuit worshipped the bears and ate them, which I suppose is similar to Christianity when you come to think about it. Maybe the difference is that when this lot ran out of polar bears they made a few more in the breeding tanks, whereas nobody has Jesus' DNA on tap and the Second Coming's still on hold.

I was suffering from auto-briefing overload. Like I said, they stick this stuff in your head and before you know it you're trawling up endless bits of irrelevant information.

"Command," I said, "can you tell the briefing team to ease off a bit? Do I really need to know that these Inuit use a base-twenty number system?"

The patronising voice came straight back at me. "Suppose we sent you to house number DA? Where would you go?"

I didn't have to think about it. "Two hundred and seventy –" sigh "– point taken."

"Yes – so concentrate on the mission and you'll only get what you need, Cherry."

We touched down close to the igloo complex. There was a quick hiss as the air pressure in the shuttle adapted to the lower atmospheric pressure of the planet. The hatch opened and the ramp dropped silently.

Kovak picked up the body bag and slung it over his shoulder. I took the bag with my toolkit off the baggage rack and followed him out into the darkness under a star-pricked sky.

At the bottom of the ramp he turned and whispered, "Power."

I reached into the bag and took out a small blue box. On its smooth surface I made a gesture with my fingertip, and all the lights went out in the complex. Looking back I couldn't see the stealth-cloaked shuttle and the stars were shining through it as though it didn't exist.

We walked over the frozen sand to the main entrance. Without breaking stride I made another gesture on the box. Local power came on to the door and it slid aside. There was a brief moment of unpleasant flicker as my eyeballs rotated through ninety degrees to bring the big iris to the front and the ultra-sensitive photo-multiplying retina to the back. The igloo was suddenly uncomfortably bright in the starlight, and we hurried inside.

Without having to think about it, we moved through the silent ice caverns, turning left and right through side passages until we came to the master bedroom. Finger gesture. The door opened.

Chairman Kinguyakii stirred under his sealskin blanket. It was probably the movement of the air as we went in. His fingers went out to wave at the bedside light, but the power was off. His wife, Kunikpok, grunted and turned on her side.

I took the anaesthetic aerosol out of my bag and moved carefully up her side of the bed until I could spray it into her nostrils. It was impossible for me not to know that her name meant 'kisses' as I made sure her airways were clear. Get this stuff out of my head, please!

On the other side of the bed Kovak laid the body bag on the floor and then tripped over a bearskin rug. Kinguyakii sat up in bed and listened, alert. Night vision is odd. He had his eyes open but he couldn't see anything, even though he was staring at me, but it felt to me that he was watching. It was like looking at the blind. I swear he sniffed the air.

I tiptoed around the foot of the bed and up the other side, to where Kovak was standing.

"Who is it? What is it?" Kinguyakii said.

I gripped his head between my hands and said, "I think it's called Regime Change," and snapped his neck.

Kovak unzipped the body bag as I tipped Kinguyakii out of the bed and onto the floor. He took the other heavy inert figure out of the black plastic, dropped him beside Kunikpok and pulled the rug over him. I waited until he'd put Kinguyakii's body into the body bag and zipped it tight, and then reached for my cute blue block. Kovak lifted the bag as though it weighed nothing, slung it over his shoulder, and headed for the door.

Two finger gestures and the block lit up with a diffused glow. I held it beside the head on the pillow and watched the read-out that appeared on the surface.

"Control?"

"Yes, Cherry?"

"Looks like the subject's brain function is below what I'd expect."

"Don't worry. He'll be fine. Just activate and exit. Now."

Two infinity signs on the blue surface and the duplicate Kinguyakii twitched and started breathing.

I tucked the blue block away and I was out of the door in seconds.

I was fine down the first two corridors. Then it went strange.

We were passing an open door on the corridor. I'd switched my vision from ultra light boost to medium plus colour, and I caught a glimpse of something brown and woody on a table in the room. My muscles froze for a moment and I staggered. Kovak was gesturing for me to hurry, but I had to go into the room.

There was a long oak dining table and resting on it was a violin, with a bow beside it. My hands were operating on their own. I picked up the violin very gently and looked inside the body. I stepped the night vision up a couple of notches to read the faint label, and trembled. It read: ANTONIUS STRADUARIUS CREMONENSIS FACIEBAT ANNO 1732. My brain function seemed to split into three parts: it's real; it's a fake; get the hell out of here.

It felt so lovely when I eased it under my chin and took the bow between my thumb and forefingers. The strings seemed to be alive – they were calling out to be caressed. I began to play the Largo from Bach's *Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin* Sonata No. 3. I remembered that I'd never known these pieces were completed in 1720, just a few years before this violin was created. The theme climbs up delicate steps, flies down swiftly like a hawk, and soars ever higher. The room was perfectly shaped acoustically. Even as I played and the lyrical perfection of the Bach resonated in the ice chamber, somewhere in the depths of my mind the memory of the snap of cracking vertebrae jarred like a breaking string.

Kovak came in and saw me. At another level I could hear Command telling us to get out fast, but I had to play. I was taken

by the music.

Most men would have smashed the violin out of my hands, but Kovak simply reached into his pocket. Horn players have a strange relationship with their bell-shaped brass mouthpieces, which they carry everywhere. They perform metallic cunnilingus wherever they happen to be, because their lip is everything.

Kovak put the mouthpiece to his lips and began to play a series of utterly destructive harmonics beside the Bach. Have you ever heard a horn player practise? A field full of farting cows is a tonal miracle compared to that. He matched every note on the violin with a brassy wet shriek a semi-tone or a tri-tone above. No school open-day early-learning performance could match it for the sheer, utter magnificence of its aural pain.

Bach sputtered to a halt. Kovak took the violin and bow from me gently and put them back on the table. He put his arm around me and guided me to the door.

A few milliseconds later I was back on mission. Kovak humped the body bag onto his shoulder and we ran to the shuttle. As we reached the flight deck we saw the lights come back on in the house and the grounds. The shuttle lifted off and we headed out of the atmosphere towards the starship.

In stealth mode it took three hours to reach the ship. I pulled up the shuttle's plans on the console, studied carefully, and then led Kovak down to the emergency food store, where the accountants had plainly decided it wasn't worth putting security cameras.

Girls, in case you're ever stuck naked in a food locker for a couple of hours with a horn player whose lips are in good shape, I recommend the Mozart Horn Concerto No. 2 Allegro, followed by the more cuddly Andante.

intermezzo

MIKE

TRACKING ID OXFBD3DC

I was feeling nice and fresh when we stood beside the shuttles on the landing field playing a fanfare based on a bastardised brass version of the *Ode To Joy* from Beethoven Nine, a tune so banal that dear old Ludwig must have had a premonition of the Eurovision Song Contest in mind when he wrote it. Most of the orchestra looked half asleep, but the assembled dignitaries were smiling, there was weak warmth from their distant star, and their Chairman, who had a name that sounded a bit like some unidentifiable Japanese dish, made a speech praising the visit and the pride of their people in being part of the greater scheme of things, the vast Commonwealth of peoples under King Kelly, and sounded pretty much like he was talking from a teleprompter.

Yesterday, this lot were going to declare unilateral independence. Today, they couldn't get their Eskimo noses further up the King's arse if they tried.

Kovak had a grin from ear to Polish ear, and laughed at everything I said, however stupid. His eyes were generally fixed on the other members of the orchestra waiting to board the shuttles. I followed his gaze and homed in on Cherry. She had a dreamy cheerful look about her, and, guess what? No acne. She was totally zit-free and looked like a Renaissance Madonna

who'd had baby J with an epidural and then smoked a load of skunk. Ever had that feeling that you'd been missed off a party invitation list?

Three hours later the starship fired up whatever made it work and headed out for distant planets around distant suns.

laque à la aigue

MIKE

TRACKING ID OXFBD3DC

Hibernica was a beautiful, green, damp and troubled world. It was raining when we arrived, raining when we left, and it rained most of the time in between. Its pervading misty gloom should have been a warning.

"Who the fuck is this Mithras?" I'd asked at the orchestral meeting before we boarded the shuttles. Big mistake. Lesson number one: never stick your hand up at meetings. I got an instant brainful of crap I really didn't want to know, and I could tell from the black looks aimed at me from the rest of the orchestra that they'd got it too.

I'll give you the headlines: Mithras, Roman god, rumoured to have been crucified and resurrected three days later, twelve disciples, and fuck all evidence for any of it, so what's new? Certainly, the big M had underground temples and loads of mysterious rites.

Hibernica was split into two extremely hostile populations of Mithras worshippers. The instant knowledge in my head told me that tectonics had split the land mass into two temperate swathes, north and south of the equator. The original settlers had made camps in both territories, but a second wave of arrivals had brought some nasty firepower with them and taken over the northern land mass, built a load of infrastructure and manufacturing and made bloody sure that the original inhabitants did the labouring. They were fiercely loyal to King Kelly.

In the South, they regarded the whole planet as their own, refused to accept that the Northern lot had any rights to it, thought the King was a colonialist bastard, and spent a lot of time and effort trying to blow things (and people) up to scare the North into submission. They were getting arms from somewhere, probably the Republican system.

All of this was made worse by a religious dispute. It all hinged on the status of the Mithraic toenail: in the South they were certain that during a celebration of the Mysteries in their underground temples the toenails of the believers actually became the toenails of Mithras; in the North they thought that was rubbish, and the hair became imbued with invisible fire. Following this crazy logic, in the South the wearing of open-toed sandals was compulsory, but they were banned in the North, where the wearing of hats was obligatory. The shuttles were piled up with trilbies and flip-flops.

Do you want to hear about Mithras' Virgin Mother? I thought not. Just take on board that they didn't agree about her. End of background notes.

Our first concert was in Northern Hibernica. There'd been some disputes about the programme because their Leader – a huge man with a two hundred decibel voice – vetoed any work by anybody who was Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist,

Jewish, Marxist, Atheist, Wicca, and any composer ever seen wearing sandals. This was a “No”-saying culture. Basically, they were as big a collection of arseholes as you’ll find in a school of anatomy.

In the long history of classical music it was pretty hard to find a composer who’d been a follower of Mithras. I overheard an argument between the Leader and the Orchestral Manager in which the human megaphone blasted out phrases like “abomination” and “no surrender” at frequent intervals. This was probably the first and last time any orchestral musician felt sympathy for an OM.

The Resident Composer was brought into the action. The RC lived, if lived was an appropriate word, on the starship and never went planet-side, which was fair enough because composers don’t get out much. The Composer was actually an AI system which incorporated every piece of music ever written or merely played. It could produce a collection of clichés in a couple of femtoseconds. We called it Andrew.

While Andrew scanned the world’s sonic repository for suitable material and chucked most of it away, the New Evidence AIs were at work constructing utterly convincing, recently discovered Mithraic Temple images with strange wall markings which, “without doubt”, proved to be evidence of musical notation, and clear images of Mithras as a baby wearing a blue hat bouncing on his mother’s knee. This was all transmitted down to Hibernica and received with much joy and gratitude. They were a long way from Earth. Gullibility knows no planetary bounds.

Finally it was agreed that we’d play Richard Strauss’ *Also Sprach Zarathustra* as an opener (there were tenuous links between Mithras and Zoroaster) and then Andrew’s seventy-five minute new epic symphonic poem *Light In The Hair*, which combined some challenging orchestral atmospherics with a sequence of ludicrous themes based on local ritual.

We played in a big, deep temple covered with shining icons. The men in the orchestra were all wearing hats, and the women had black headscarves and very long dresses covering their legs. The audience loved Andrew’s new work. They stood and waved their hands side to side in the air as their little hymns to Mithras emerged from the soupy strings. The music lifted them to ecstatic heights of religious fervour. The Leader smiled. It was shit. It was rubbish. But they loved us.

There was no reception. Just a very long sermon from the Leader about our need to embrace the reality of Mithras, how the excellence of our performance paid witness to the flame of Mithras coursing through our curls, and how bad things were going to be for us if we didn’t sign up to an everlasting insurance policy. I wanted to ask him if the Mithraic fire worked on the pubes as well as the head, but thought better of it.

We went into combat mode when the orchestra was making its slow way out of the temple. Suddenly I got Command talking in my head and I was voice-linked to Kovak and Emeline Sullivan, who’d been required to play seventeen notes on the grand piano during Andrew’s massive work. Kovak and I leaned over the piano and tried to look as though we were having a casual conversation as Emeline took some filigree wire from beneath her long black dress and weaved a pattern between the strings. Kovak got a bit awkward when Control told him to put his horn inside the piano, but some traffic about top-range Paxman and

Yamaha horns seemed to calm him down.

I was on guard. Every time somebody came near I engaged them in conversation and edged them away. I agreed to all their preposterous statements about the South. I said I’d think seriously about my need to embrace the truth of their god. I’m an easygoing man, but I was beginning to hate these people. These were our friends?

The edge of my heads-up display showed me pictures of another group offloading a pile of crates from a shuttle into some local transport.

My last sight before we left the temple was the inside of the grand piano just before Kovak closed the lid. It had a web of wires, a French horn, and four open-toed sandals. WTF was going on?

The shuttles lifted off and took us over the planetary equator towards what the Northern Leader had described as “the domain of deluded nail-worshippers.” I was idly flicking the in-flight entertainment system through channels on their primitive video network when I saw pictures of a young woman standing naked against a wall with a crowd coming forward one by one to hit her with a stiff cane of something that looked like bamboo. The mob was shouting “Apostate” as she collapsed into a bloody heap and they surged forward to kick her to death. The news report superimposed a caption stating **THIS IS THE PRICE OF DISBELIEF.**

The South was as different as a warm shower from a cold bath.

Thirty seconds after we landed the guy who’d been delegated to look after us, a short redheaded man called something like Leem, stood in front of the lowering shuttle hatches, and shouted with a big smile “Right, you ugly bastards, who wants to learn Hibernian lace-making, and who wants to go to the fuckin’ pub?”

I don’t know if any lace got made, but a whole load of us were in a warm, smoky boozer as soon as the ground transports could get us there. The beer was heavy and dark with a creamy white top. The barman used the last few drops from the tap to make a sign that looked like *mmmmm*. Leem told us this either represented the ten toes of Mithras or the sound you made when you first sipped delicate froth.

Just about everybody was smoking. Blue clouds swirled in the ceiling lights above the deep brown wood bar.

“Leem,” I asked, lighting up, “isn’t it illegal to smoke indoors anywhere in the Commonwealth?”

“Michael,” he said, “– and what a good name that is – if we want to have a little puff we reckon that’s our human right – so fuck the Commonwealth, if you’ll pardon the expression. We’d rather be fucking happy than fucking legal.”

The music started. Fiddles, pipes, and a huge drum set up a rhythm so physical you could feel your very bones itching to dance. I was about to jump up and make an idiot of myself when three beautiful women with black hair and green eyes went in front of the band and started to make amazingly fast taps with their feet while the rest of the body was as stiff and upright as a monk in a brothel.

“That was fantastic!” I said to Leem when they stopped.

“Not bad, is it?” he said. “Wait a couple of hundred years till we get the arms sorted out and it’ll be fucking brilliant. Now, it’s a guest night, so why don’t you lot play something?”

Lurking inside every orchestra is a football team, a cricket

team, and a great jazz quintet. Instruments appeared from nowhere, and before long our boys and girls were blasting out some really funky James Brown numbers: 'Down And Out In New York City' brought them to their feet cheering.

About seven pints of the magic stout later I said to Leem, "Don't leave the Commonwealth. You're just what we need."

"Listen, Michael," he said, very seriously. "Anybody who plays good music's welcome here but just leave the fucking politics out. Got it?"

It's a terrible thing when Control takes over. It's like a freezing hand running up your spine and then you hear a voice that might be yours, but isn't, in your head. "Back off, Mike. This man is on the Central Committee of the Hibernian Revolutionary Army."

"It's your planet," I said to Leem. He smiled and said, "Right, Michael," and gave me a big warm hug.

It was a great party. They laughed at our pink toes and angry strap-marks from the flip-flops, sent out for some shoes, and chanted "Fock the priests" as we put them on. One of the dancers came and sat down beside me. She was called Morag. She had a really cute way of wriggling her toes and when she talked to me she put her hand on my arm.

"In your religion," I asked (bear in mind that I was pissed out of my brains), "is it permitted for a man to lick a woman's feet?"

She lifted her foot a little and said, "Michael, it's not just permitted. It's a fucking requirement!"

I loved these people. I felt at home. I pondered my chances of dumping the orchestra, staying here and dedicating fifty percent of my tongue to the oboe's reed and the rest to Morag's toes, ankles, knees, and...

It was too good to be true. At four in the morning the barmen pulled the plugs on the band, turned off the lighting on the little stage, and the room went silent as he switched the video Newscast onto a big screen. I can see it still. Bloody bodies were being pulled from the blasted wreckage of the Northern temple where we'd played our concert. The shiny icons were piled in shattered heaps. The broken remnants of children were tangled with the severed limbs of their mothers.

And then the Northern Leader holding up some tattered sandals and bellowing "Murdering Southern spawn of evil!"

Leem leaped up and turned to us all. "We did *not* do this!" he shouted. "We did abso-fucking-lutely *not* fucking *do* this!"

And then the pictures of a Republican arms dump not far from us in flames.

And then the cold fingers up my spine, instant sobriety, and the calm voice in my head telling me to kill Leem. I could not not do it. I was other. He smiled a strange smile at me as I smashed my hardened fingers through his rib cage and crushed his aorta.

Soon after, we were on the shuttles watching the neutron bomb-tipped cruise missiles fly over the equator from north to south to "restore normality."

A terrible gloom came over me, as though I were playing Penderecki's *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima* with a hang-over. It was like a heavy pressure on my skull. I didn't want these people to be irradiated with a burst of high-energy neutrons. A terrible feeling of morality ran in contradictory oppositions in my mind, polytonality of F themes over agitated B chords. I didn't remember feeling like this before. Below me, more lights flashed, and I turned my head away from the view port. Control

spoke in my ear, congratulating me on a job well done, and I told them to fuck off. They weren't pleased. Fuck them. I am a player, not an instrument.

Later, on the starship, I sat alone in the warm wet jungle of the hydroponics chambers watching bees hover beside bright red runner bean flowers and tried to let their fast flattertonguing buzz empty the bottle of my mind, but it remained obstinately full of contradictions. How puzzling it is that I can hold my hand still, or run scales and arpeggios with my fingers, but I cannot control my brain. Thanks a lot, evolution – how many more million years do you need?

A tall, skinny blonde pushed her way through the damp bean plants and sat beside me.

"I'm Gina. How are you feeling, Mike?" she asked.

I said nothing. My head was down. She sat beside me for a long time. Eventually, she twined her fingers into mine, gently pulled me up, led me back to my cabin, and screwed me in a delicate, tender, but immensely erotic way until I drifted off to sleep. Our civilisation has many faults, but we really have cracked therapy.

It doesn't always work. I woke up dreaming of dancing toes.

twelve bar variations

CHERRY

TRACKING ID 0XFDCD5A2

I'm enjoying going straight for a while. It's helped immensely since they took Kovak's English away, because I'm like, don't bother talking, just take me doggy-style and I'm fine.

The planet Republica was interesting. We landed in their main city, called Jefferson. It was like a vast car park spotted with single storey malls and condos. When the shuttle came in I could see miles of cornfields around it. Everything was laid out on a grid, as though they'd developed geometry up to the point of straight lines and not got as far as curves yet. I was expecting Control to brief me, but they didn't, so it looked like I'd got a day off.

The people at the reception were almost unbearably friendly. They were like long-lost twins giving us a recap of the missing years in ten minutes. I like to think I'm quite outgoing for a violinist, but I found it a bit cloying, like a warm wet dog jumping on your face.

I remembered suddenly, as though I'd always known it, that this planet was the major player in the movement to break away from the Commonwealth. They were arming at a terrifying rate. They had 'liberated' another planet in their system from the dangerous sin of having free health care, and now sixty percent of the population had woken up to the wonders of medical insurance whilst quite a lot of the remaining forty percent didn't wake up at all.

The buffet was a mixture of Japanese nibbles and hamburgers, and a very good Merlot, which they insisted on calling *merLOH*, but when you're twenty-seven light years from Paris I suppose the *Académie française* is not a serious threat.

We were staying in a two hundred storey hotel built like a pyramid, complete with a Sphinx in the grounds, which turned out to be a Baptist church with a gymnasium which was rapidly populated with most of the string section trying to get an inch off their waistlines. Just off the foyer they had a bar like an

Egyptian tomb with sarcophagi around the walls and a huge gold and blue illuminated mask of Tutankhamen poised over the assembled brass, woodwind and percussion sections of the orchestra (plus the double basses, who didn't regard themselves as string players) all necking the local beer like there was no tomorrow – which, for brass players, is a strong possibility.

They gave me a big cheer when I walked in, and shuffled up so that I could sit between Kovak and Mike Alexander. A waitress dressed like Nefertiti came over. This would have worked better if she hadn't had long blonde hair. I made the mistake of asking what cocktails they did, and she embarked on a long recitation that she'd obviously learned under hypnosis, whilst managing to maintain a smile revealing teeth so white I thought I'd go blind before she finished.

"I'll have a Gin and Tonic," I said, giving in under the onslaught.

"You got it. Have a nice evening," she said, with a nova of toothy brilliance.

Kovak laughed and ran his hand up and down my thigh in that owning way men do, which is pretty much like dogs pissing on trees. Mike was looking at me. He's about five seven and slim. He is not my type. I've always preferred elephants to antelopes, but tonight there was something – how can I say this? – *hurt* in his eyes, and I felt a sudden flush of something almost maternal but also oddly arousing when I looked at him.

"What is it?" I whispered in his ear, as Nefertiti brought me a G&T with far too much ice.

"Cherry," he said, "we're fucked."

I wish. Kovak came back to my room totally pissed, got into my bed and went straight to sleep. He snored all night. His weight caused a kind of gravity well in the bed, down which I rolled. It was like trying to sleep inside the erupting crater of Vesuvius. Why do people insist on trying to sleep together? It's not necessary to huddle together for warmth unless you're in a tent under six feet of snow. Would it not be better, I said to myself in the night, if he came into my bed in the dawn light warm and cosy and wrapped me up like a strong soft shield against the pain of the coming day? People who snore should work night shifts – that way everybody gets the bed to themselves.

The concert hall was vast, a gigantic white globe suspended on cantilevered arches and cables over a wide circle of grassy park dotted with little lakes and donut counters. I was standing by one of these when I turned round and found myself looking straight into the eyes of an alligator. I tried to go into combat mode, but I couldn't. I suspect I screamed rather loudly, because the donut seller came running out, shouting "It's okay, lady! Take it easy! They're tame!" and patted the alligator on the head. It looked up at him, up at me, sideways to the donut I'd dropped on the grass, waddled forward a couple of steps, took the donut between about a thousand huge teeth, and headed back to the pond.

He was young and black, wearing a baseball cap the wrong way round.

"You gotta be off-world," he said, as I tried to get my pulse rate down to mere panic level. I nodded, and he asked, "Where you from?"

"Earth – I'm with the orchestra. We're playing tonight."

"May I ask you something?" he said in the way that I'd learned at the reception was not really a question in itself but a drum-

roll leading up to a show-stopper. "That King Kelly guy – he kills a load of people, huh? He's into a shitload of torture and crap like that. Is that right?"

"What makes you think that?"

"It's every night on Fox News. Why don't you stay here?"

"I can't afford the medical insurance," I said. "I have an inherited heart problem, a high genetic prediction of dementia, and hints of frontal lobe epilepsy. I really don't think this is the place for me."

None of that was true, but I was fighting an urge to rip his head off (which I could have done) and feed it to the alligators, although they'd probably have wanted a green salad with crumbly blue cheese on the side.

After rehearsal I went for a swim in the indoor pool at the hotel. I checked the inflatable animals around the sides very carefully for signs of life before getting in.



MIKE

TRACKING ID 0XFBED3DC

The first problem with the concert was the fact that there was no bar in the entire place, there was no bar nearby, and it was a twenty minute drive to the hotel. The entire brass, double-basses, percussion and half the woodwind went on immediate strike.

The Orchestra Manager came in to the Green Room and said that the local powers had decreed that drinking and culture were incompatible; it was against Federal Law to have alcohol in a public venue apart from boxes reserved for Senators, their families and guests. No deal.

Torsten, Principal Trombone, had been delegated as spokesman on the grounds that he was the most level-headed and tactful. He stood up and said, "Tell them to go and fuck themselves up the arse or a get a Senator in here now!"

I thought it was brief, eloquent, and to the point.

The local cell-phone network was probably under some strain for the next fifteen minutes until the State Governor walked in wearing a tuxedo and a very professional smile.

"Hi, guys," he said. "I just want to thank you more than I can tell you for pointing out a very stupid failure by the overpaid tax-dollar sucking government-employed crypto-Socialists who sneaked this ridiculous legislation past the eyes of the God-fearing freedom-loving people of this great State. As of this moment I have decreed that this Green Room, nearby dressing rooms, and rest rooms, are classed as Boxes, and that all visiting artists are classed as friends. And I'd also like to say that my wife and I would be honoured to come back here after the concert and meet with you."

The big men with bulges in their jacket armpits moved aside as a trolley the size of a four-seater car was wheeled in, and the brass section started passing cans and bottles around. I was standing near the door as he went out.

"Great speech, Senator," I said.

He leaned well into my body space and whispered, seemingly without his lips moving, "Friend – there are cameras everywhere and a certain amount of bullshit comes with my job, OK? Just remember we're not all stupid. Things can change."

I should have known the concert was going to be a disaster just from looking at the running order. We tightened our bowties, smoothed down our DJs, and went out to play a highly provocative programme.

The middle section of the auditorium facing us was reserved for the Great and Good of Republica. I played a clean A440 on the oboe and the orchestra tuned up. When even the strings had got close to it, silence descended. The Presidential Party processed in to their prime seats in the box at the centre of the upper tier.

President Maria Kronkite was the perfect product of their flavour of democracy. Whereas we had decided on minimum intelligence levels for candidates, they imposed a maximum. Dressed in her canary yellow suit she stood at the front of the box, acknowledging the applause. I ran a few of her sayings through my mind. My favourite was "I can't see why unborn babies shouldn't have gun rights. They have a right to shoot abortionists."

We played Stravinsky's arrangement of *The Star Spangled Banner*, a re-harmonisation so controversial that the sheet music was 'arrested' by the police in Boston before it could be performed in 1944. So that was one finger up to the rebels.

The Republicans hated the French, so they were probably not too pleased to have to listen to Boulez's *Le marteau sans maître*, plenty of Debussy, and a symphony by a French-Canadian composer. A question I never got to ask was, if they disliked the French so much, why did they adopt Napoleon's stupid idea of driving on the right?

In the second half we started with Elgar, followed that with Shostakovich, and then came to the final, and on the face of it, less controversial piece, Wagner's *The Ride of the Valkyries*. If Wagner were still alive he'd be immensely rich on the royalties from the films that 'borrowed' his inspired triple-time extravaganza.

It starts with the strings threatening their way up and down, tier after tier, and then the brass comes in with the main theme, menacing, da dadata DAH da, da datata DAH da, da datata DAH da, ta data DAH. It builds. The flying Valkyries are poised on their ledge ready to take the heroes back to Valhalla. The winged maidens soar. The orchestra verges on orgasmic.

At this intense point of the music, flaps opened on the stage and hundreds of small dark grey helicopters flew out. They were six-inch long Hueys, each with two tiny gunners hanging out of their open port and starboard sides. They flew round the vast auditorium, wave after wave, and the audience loved it, standing up, cheering and whooping. As staging goes, this was elevating a cultural evening into a rock concert. Lovers clasped hands at the sheer joy of being here. Children woke up and pointed at the circling helicopters. President Kronkite smiled. Smoke guns poured mist into the vast bowl as scent generators pervaded the auditorium with the earthy smell of jungle and rainforest. The Hueys flew in ever more complex patterns, making close passes over the assembly, looping, swirling, and then finally lining up in two perfect rows, one above the other, directly in front of the central section where The Great and The Good stood clapping, like a squadron waiting to take the salute.

President Kronkite stood and raised her right hand to her forehead, and seconds later the whole central section was on its feet.

A single Huey moved forward out of the ranks. It hovered

until the orchestral brass reached *fortissimo* and then fired two missiles. One exploded the canary yellow President into blood-red gas, and the other decapitated her husband.

The rest of the Huey squadron wheeled, targeted, and reduced almost all of the people in the central enclave to a pile of smoking, bleeding wreckage. Blood poured down the steps in the aisles. The cheering turned to screaming.

We are a disciplined team, whether fighting or playing, but the Wagner ground to a halt as most of the orchestra went numb or began to cry. The Conductor had seen nothing because he was facing towards us, and for a few futile bars he continued to beat the air and look as though the spirit of the composer was running through him; but faced with a silent, sobbing, orchestra, conductors find themselves strangely redundant.

The tiny helicopters formed themselves into a sphere in the air over the stalls, and shot themselves to pieces.

As thousands of people fought to get out of the building the State Governor clutched his wife and children in his arms and made his way down the stairs through the piles of bloody flesh. They alone had survived. Crimson-splattered but intact, they walked across the floor and up onto the stage.

"This was not the deal," he said, and then shouted, "This was not the deal!"

I suddenly felt a terrible pain in the back of my head. My limbs were heavy and stiff. My lips were pulling themselves back into a rictus. It was agony, but I took my oboe in my hands and broke it across my knee.

TRANSCRIPT EARTH CONTROL ONE/PSYCH OFFICER
GINA MONTANA VIA LINK SHIP SCARLATTI
TRACKING ID 0XC87F2BE

EC1 Gina, what the fuck is going on?

GINA We're experiencing conditional breakthrough between sub-personalities in the orchestra.

EC1 Cut the psych talk and tell us exactly what that means.

GINA If you insult me, I will appeal under harassment rules.

EC1 Fine. Try to explain.

GINA The orchestra has a set of rich personality types bred under command executive order 10056009. This order requested more complex entities. Unfortunately, we're seeing side-effects. Specifically, we're seeing dominance of the emotional segment over the military. In research terms, it's fascinating.

EC1 Screw your research. What about the mission?

GINA The mission is intact. And my response to you wanting to screw my research is that I wouldn't screw you if you were the last living thing in the galaxy.

EC1 I'll ignore that. Make it simple, Gina.

GINA Their feelings have become stronger than their military training.

EC1 What the fuck do they need feelings for? They're supposed to be musicians. They just play music. Musicians do not need feelings. Got it?

GINA They have developed something like a conscience.

EC1 Oh, please!

GINA Seriously. It's a radical breakthrough.

EC1 The radical breakthrough is that we take control of thir-

teen star systems that want to break up the Commonwealth and do their own stupid thing. That is the mission. Full stop. Point. Period. You will institute immediate reprogramming.

GINA I don't have the facilities on this ship.

EC1 Let me just check... Oh no, you don't. Never mind. Never mind.

[LINK CUT]

MIKE

TRACKING ID 0X0 — OFFLINE

RECOVERED 3095 FROM SCRAMBLED TX

We weren't far out of orbit when Gina pounded on my cabin door.

"Obviously not tantric sex then," I said. She ignored me. "Shuttle bays — now!" she yelled, and moved on up the corridor.

The lights were on emergency levels. It was dim and moody as I ran towards the bays in the central zone of the long starship. Confused members of the orchestra were looking frightened as they hurried down the amber and black corridors.

"Mission mode!" I shouted as I ran past, but it didn't make any difference.

I caught a fleeting glimpse of Gina far up ahead, and changed my track to follow her. She jumped into a transport capsule. This ship was two miles long, and you needed to take a day's leave if you walked. I climbed into the next capsule and locked it to hers. We accelerated up the hard vacuum tube, and the capsule stopped outside Flight Deck One.

She saw me just before she went through the hatch. "Mike — what the flaming fuck are *you* doing here?" she said, strangely low-voiced.

"Thought you might need help," I said.

"No time to argue. Come on."

I'd never been on the flight deck before. Let's face it, the orchestra is cargo. I'd imagined dozens of people wearing blue jumpsuits and a load of big screens. Instead, the place was deserted. When we went in various tactical holograms lit up showing the ship's position relative to the star and planet Republica. A klaxon started to wail and a sign lit up saying ENGINE CRITICALITY IN 73 MINUTES.

Gina ran over to a crimson panel, turned to me, and said, "Watch the hatches. I'm putting you into combat mode." She faced the crimson patch and said, "Psych Officer Gina Holman. Emergency stealth cloak on all shuttles, immediate effect. Code 309812."

My vision went ultra-sharp and I could see far into the infra-red and ultra-violet ranges. I felt a deep sense of terror.

"Gina, I can't do this!" I yelled.

"You can. You must. Last time, I promise!" she shouted back.

Side hatches slid up and three heavily armed men moved in. I made a gesture in my mind, as though waving the fingers of a third arm, opened my mouth, and three perfect ladybirds flew out, circled sweetly, landed on the security squad and blew their faces off.

As soon as the shuttles landed on the surface of Republica we

sent the message on broadband transmission. *Take deep cover! One hour until extreme gamma burst!*

I've got something closer to a *hautbois* than an oboe, but it'll do. I had to cut the body from a tree and the reed from something like bamboo. It works. Various members of the orchestra are singing, which, robbed of their harps and cellos, is all they can do in this vast grassland. The percussionists have come out of this best because there's always something to bash.

Gina is looking at me across the field as I play a woody-sounding Bach and behind her I can see Kovak still struggling to make a convincing violin for Cherry, who sits watching patiently. We are so calm. Gina's hypnotherapy is doing something alright.

Only Gina's knowledge of the stealth codes let us steal the shuttles as the starship made its slow acceleration out of the Republica system. She was right to make us huddle at the back of the caves we mapped as we descended. The light and assorted radiation was deadly as the starship detonated.

A great burden has gone from me. Yesterday, I lifted a delicate green spider from my arm and set it down outside the cave where it could have a chance of another life.

There is so much room in my head for music. Across the fields I can see a posse of men on horseback approaching. Once, perhaps, I would have raised a charged finger and killed them in an instant. Gina could flip us back into this, but we have asked her not to.

Now, I wave to my friends and Gina, my lover, to come to me, and we sit as I play the Bach and hope that the power of music will stay the sword of revenge. In my heart I know that we have played the music of death, and the long Coda awaits us.

"Gina," I ask, between movements, "how come we trained to kill aliens and ended up killing people?"

"We never got to the aliens," she says. "Another orchestra's on its way."

"Poor buggers," I say.

"Don't worry about them," she says, with an enigmatic look. "They won't feel a thing."

The State Governor is at the head of the posse. They ride into our camp, circle and dismount. Some of the riders untie the backpacks on their horses and start distributing cold beers. You have never seen a brass section move so fast in your life.

A tall woman swings herself elegantly off the horse next to the Governor's. She and the Governor come over to us.

"Hi, Mike," he says. "This is my wife. You owe her a visit with you."

So we visit with her.

Later the transport arrives with harps, violas, trombones, flutes, cellos, contra-basses, tubas, oboes, cor anglais: the whole thing.

We sit in the light beams of our corralled shuttles with the great splash of the Milky Way stars above us, and play such music as you have never heard.

> Jim Hawkins has written more screenplays than he cares to remember, including scripts for 1990, *Space 1999*, *Time Slip* (YTV) and the BBC's dramatisation of the Apollo 13 mission. *Thank You Comrades* (BBC) was nominated for a BAFTA Best Play award. After all this, he's returned to prose writing so that he can direct it himself.

BOOK ZONE

FINCH*

Jeff VanderMeer
review + interview by
Maureen Kincaid Speller

THE INFLATABLE VOLUNTEER

Steve Aylett
review by Paul F. Cockburn

VETERAN

Gavin Smith
review by Duncan Lunan

NEW MODEL ARMY

Adam Roberts
review by John Howard

THE HOLY MACHINE

Chris Beckett
review by Peter Loftus

BEARINGS

Gary K. Wolfe
review by Paul Graham Raven

DECLARE

Tim Powers
review by Andrew J. Wilson

KRAKEN

China Miéville
review by Paul F. Cockburn

THE ORPHANED WORLDS

Michael Cobley
review by Juliet E. McKenna

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FINCH

Jeff VanderMeer

Corvus, 339pp, £12.99 tpb

Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller

Finch is the third of VanderMeer's Ambergris novels (along with *City of Saints and Sinners* and *Shriek: An Afterword*) though it exists quite comfortably as a stand-alone narrative. Ambergris is a city that has been torn apart by war, but is now under occupation of another sort, by the gray caps, creatures who emerged from underground during the Rising. In the aftermath of this takeover, they are transforming the city through corruption, literally; the city is rotting, being reshaped by fungal eruptions, its people pacified by fungal drugs or victims of fungal attacks. People struggle to survive as best they can, some by becoming rebels and leaving the city; others stay on and work, albeit unwillingly, with the gray caps to maintain some semblance of order. Finch is one of these. A man with no past, he has become a policeman, and as the novel opens is called in to investigate the discovery of two dead bodies in an apartment, a man and a gray cap, the former unmarked, the latter sliced neatly in half at the waist.

From the outset, this is clearly not a classic homicide but something almost Fortean in its bizarreness, though people seem less excited than one might expect, perhaps because war and the Rising have stripped them of the capacity to be surprised by anything any more. As Finch makes enquiries, he becomes

uncomfortably aware that more than one group is interested in the bodies and that he is the focal point for their interactions with one another. Let's just say it's inevitably painful for Finch.

The deaths provide the impetus for Finch's journeys around Ambergris as he investigates, and are the key to the novel's climax, but having said that, compelling as the mystery is, I still can't help feeling that in some way it is almost incidental to the story. What really captured my attention in *Finch* is the portrayal of a city struggling to survive, its population trying to make some sort of accommodation with the situation in which it finds itself. Finch is the albeit reluctant representative of order imposed by the invaders who simultaneously acts as a kind of remembrancer for the old city. I think it is no coincidence that he keeps a map of the old city with an overlay on which he charts the many changes that Ambergris has undergone. Much as he stands between the different interests that swirl around the bodies, Finch also stands between the past and the present of Ambergris.

This is a fantastically atmospheric novel in so many ways. On the one hand there is the vegetal transformation of the city and the people; everything is slimy, oozing, glistening, and desperately repellent. The streets are dangerous, broken down into smaller and smaller, almost invisible territories. On the other, there is the evocation of a city half-emptied of its population, somehow struggling on, its inhabitants worn, grey and malnourished, hanging on to such small pleasures as they can find. I think in particular of Rathven, Finch's friend, who scours the city, rescuing books and the knowledge they contain, and of the Photographer, constantly recording the world, as well as Finch himself, haunted by memory and identity.

I was momentarily tempted to devote this review to listing books and authors that other people have said that *Finch* is either similar to, or a mash-up of, of which there are a surprising number, some of them a little improbable. Prompted by this orgy of comparison, the two novels that sprang to my mind were Pat Murphy's *The City, Not Long After* and Ursula Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven*, because both have a similarly elegaic flavour, a sense of past and present overlapping, of sudden and unwelcome transformation. Comparisons are useful but in the end *Finch* remains elusive; there is nothing quite like it, which I find exceedingly cheering.

THE STREETS OF AMBERGRIS

Jeff VanderMeer interviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller

It's obvious that your conception of Ambergris is very detailed, with a highly developed sense of place. What is the attraction of "the city", as opposed to a broader geographical landscape, for you as a writer?

My parents were in the Peace Corps; between the ages of four and ten, I visited a lot of places, in addition to living in Fiji for five years. "Visited" is the operative word. We spent several months in India and Southeast Asia, and that, combined with my mother's study of Indian folk art, religion, and culture, meant I felt comfortable writing a couple of stories set in that region. When it came to writing novels, the primary reason I settled into surreal fantasy mode, and especially cities, is to reconcile my childhood experiences. We were almost always in cities, which are fairly confusing to a child – just the sense of being a small person surrounded by lots of adults in a strange place. Capturing the chaos of a city and its many joys and contradictions comes, too, from many travels as an adult. All the travelling meant I didn't have a real home, so, it wasn't like with Stephen King, where I could write a fake Maine that would seem real. Fantasy allowed me the distance, and to take bits and pieces from all over. Experiences like seeing a trance dance in Indonesia. Or, in the first Ambergris story I ever wrote, to comment on the missionary impulse, something I have a strong distaste for after growing up in Fiji, one of those places where missionaries made a concerted effort to convert people.

Ambergris is meant as a reflection of reality, so it reflects everything from 9-11 to European colonialism and American empire. It's a good way to make a point without being didactic – the change in context is such that hopefully people think about these issues without realizing they're being made to think about them.

Some commentators on *Finch* are focusing on the crime/detection aspect of the novel, whereas I seem to have read it more for mood and the fantastic. I notice too that China Miéville is quite emphatic about *The City and the City* being a crime novel. I wonder how you position

Finch in relation to either/both genres, and what your thinking was in making *Finch* a policeman, albeit a somewhat disaffected one.

I go back and forth on the crime-detection aspect. On the one hand, I committed completely to those tropes, but I did so in the service of something else entirely. I'm a huge mystery reader so this came naturally to me. For the conventions I mean to subvert, the usage must be visceral and instinctual. Then, as the novel opens up, you can see the detective plot as what's happening, but not what the novel's about. The novel is about life in an occupied city. It's about trust and types of love and types of betrayal. It's also about relationships in these kinds of situations. And then it's about questions of identity and transformation. Are certain kinds of transformation necessary, even if they seem like corruption or like a giving up of self? How does the history of the city impinge on personal histories? What's the nature of loyalty?

I'm sick of protagonists who aren't compromised or constrained. Most of us are compromised or constrained in some way, in real life. I could've used the point of view of a rebel fighting against the totalitarian regime of the gray caps, but that's just too easy. *Finch*, as a policeman/detective, is much more interesting because he is already corrupted to some degree – it's the daily fight against that corruption becoming total that makes him heroic. People have to do this every day in the real world, in all kinds of failed states, fascist regimes, and worse. What does a decent person do in an indecent situation? I'm also sick of protagonists in fantasy who are part of the upper classes, but I found it interesting to find out that *Finch* had once had a kind of privilege similar to that through his father, and now didn't. The juxtaposition of those different types of life not only made his character more nuanced but gives the reader views of the city before and after. Without glimpses of what Ambergris was before Occupation, the scenes of Occupation are meaningless.

You have cited writers such as Mervyn Peake and Angela Carter as influences,



> jeffvandermeer.com

and also Steve Erickson's *Arc d'X*. What's fuelling the creation of *Finch*? And what is your view of urban fantasy, as a genre?

There's only one direct influence on *Finch*: John Le Carré. I read all of his novels, and took notes, before writing *Finch*. Le Carré is a master of the spy novel, and yet he was removed enough from what I wanted to do that I could read his work, take notes on craft/technique, and not have it contaminate my novel through pastiche. On a line-by-line level he is amazing in what he can do. I wanted to be steeped in that sense of atmosphere. Everything else was just already there on the subconscious level. I wasn't responding to or communicating with any particular writer or writers. I was more communicating with history, from Paris under the Nazis to Beirut and Baghdad, and with the twin towers from 9-11. I did steal a fungal gun from Cronenberg's *Existenz*, however, who, it could be argued, took it from Burroughs.

I'm sure what they call "urban fantasy"

these days will or has already evolved out of the mode of being simply rip-off of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, but I'm not over marketers at publishing houses having stolen the term from those of us who were writing urban fantasy but didn't bother to trademark it. And although it's generally a good thing to have so many proactive, affirmative female protagonists in current urban fantasy, it comes with a kind of generic stamp for the most part.

How do you feel about the ways in which New Weird has developed since the anthology? Have useful things emerged as a result?

The New Weird anthology has done great – it survived running the Gauntlet of Reluctant SF Critics, and once it emerged into the world proper, readers tended to really like it, younger writers who didn't know anything about this brand of weird emailed to say they loved having access in one place to a sampling of so much great stuff, and in general it was a positive experience. I was only disappointed in two things: that Gary K. Wolfe and Farah Mendelsohn, who I both respect a lot, fell down on the job of engagement with the thesis and the evidence set out in the anthology, Farah in her short history of fantasy (her New Weird has nothing to do with the reality of it) and Gary in his initial *Locus* review, where he just refused to engage in dialogue with the book.

The irony here is, as a writer, I could care less about New Weird, but as anthologists, Ann and I cared very much about documenting it properly – the history, the possible canon, the discussion around that, and the arguments of the naysayers. We originally wanted the anthology to be called *New Weird?*, after a Finnish New Weird anthology edited by Jukka Halme, but Tachyon thought that sounded too wishy-washy. The book is meant to be at war with itself, to leave the reader with answers but with questions, too. We're very proud of it – great writers like Junot Diaz teach it at MIT, it's sold well, and other editors have stolen our approach to structure.

Lots of new writers refer to the New Weird and New Weird writings. If the term allows people to find interesting literary fantasy, that's great. If it enters into the critical lexicon as a useful term, that's great, too. The main point, I think, is that we shouldn't be automatically cynical of such things – it did emerge organically, there was a fascinating discussion around

it, and my only regret is that at the time I was so scornful of the idea. I know in part why I was, though – M. John Harrison was saying it was a distinctly English phenomenon, which seemed exclusionary and inaccurate. If I'd been a wiser person I would've ignored that and participated more constructively. But I'm also always at war with myself on such things – I believe intensely, at heart, in the idea of everything being Fiction and that the division between so-called genre and so-called mainstream is incredibly harmful to discussion of books and what books are actually about. Accidents of birth, luck, and other things beyond our control often determine whether the best non-realist books are published as mainstream or as genre. The fact that this then dictates which books get to enter into dialogue with one another irritates me immensely.

For me, whatever winds up championing unusual and idiosyncratic works – works that take chances and fly in the face of the status quo – is fine by me. I can't take movements very seriously, because at heart I'm an absurdist and I don't believe organized groups of writers or critics or even readers are a good thing. I care only about the specificity of specific details about the world, specific writers – individuals. Any group larger than two is likely to become stupid over time.

Do you think we need movements and manifestos to jolt us out of a rut? To me, New Weird was, indeed remains, a productive way of thinking about things but I wonder about a slide from philosophy to marketing.

I think New Weird is both marketing term and a valid philosophical way of looking at strange fiction. I like the idea of a jolt – yes, it's actually that, a shock to the system, and a way of holding onto one's idealism in a field where you can very easily lose that. It's vital in our mass media age to hold on to the idea that fiction can be important, that it does try to illuminate the human condition, that we do read for more than “just” to be entertained. That words count. I think New Weird did that for a time. Something else will come along, no doubt, that chides New Weird for not being free enough. We're always needing that idea of the surreal coming back: beauty in the service of liberty, freedom through the unexpected.

We have 5 copies Finch to give away. Use FINCH as your subject line.



THE INFLATION VOLUNTEER

Steve Aylett

Raw Dog Screaming Press, 166pp, \$13.95 pb

Reviewed by Paul F. Cockburn

At the risk of tarring such an unabashed writer with a well-worn cliché, Steve Aylett is literary Marmite: you either utterly love or completely loathe his work. Interestingly, this is as true of his earlier work – *The Inflation Volunteer* was originally published in 1999 – as more recent novels such as *Lint*.

Aylett undeniably has an individual turn of phrase: ‘People made of meat sat at tables made of wood,’ for example. More disturbing is his uncommon turn of ideas: ‘Nothing like a spider in the mouth to get you thinking’ being a somewhat disturbing case in point. Aylett flies highest, though, when these two attributes are combined: “Redeeming your exploits by slamming a moral template over ‘em like a sandwich toaster, eh?” says one character in *The Inflation Volunteer*. Later, the narrator thinks of the time he returned to a circus: ‘Heard it had been turned into a school for midgets and wanted to see. Nothing had changed, except it looked bigger.’

Yet it's not just Aylett's ideas that can all too easily leave the reader stunned; their momentum is so palpable – bursting into existence in one sentence, vanished and forgotten the next – that even readers who are really trying to pay attention will lose their grip.

Neither Aylett nor his first person narrator – hardly the most pleasant of

company, even in the hellish world he lives in – have any inclination to explain what's happening, instead taking us on a white water stream-of-consciousness, a literary tag-race in which the narrator's conversation passes from interviewer to the police to 'every last bastard in the bar'. He starts out campaigning for the Mayor (which would seem to be down in the most loathsome career choice, in Aylett's world or any other), and he winds up in front of a firing squad. Nor is that the worst of it. There are plenty of potentially dangerous low lives out to get him, even under the guise of friendship. Perhaps the strongest of these friends is Eddie, to whom we are first introduced; if we knew what he looked like, his face would be in the illustrated dictionary for entries including 'hapless', 'hopeless' and 'deluded' – though some of his bizarre get-rich-quick schemes are truly charming. Just not the metal underwear for bears.

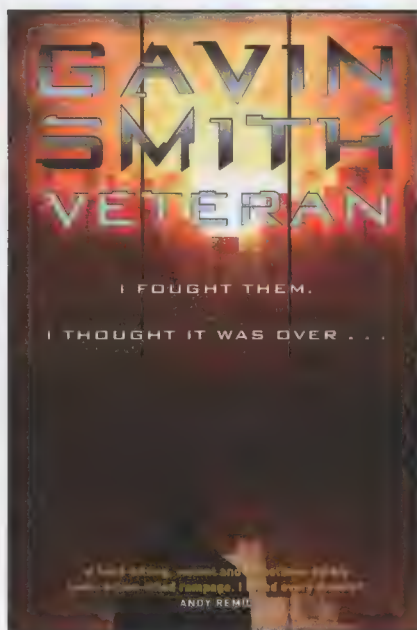
Surreal *The Inflatable Volunteer* certainly is; however, the chaotic nature of the book (in which one sentence or paragraph – often the same thing, it must be said – for the most part seemingly bear no obvious relationship to those read either before or after) belies the book's main architectural symmetry. This can be gauged even just from the chapter titles; after our introduction to Eddie, the parade of 'What I told...' chapters team-tag their way towards the middle of the book; then, the route of characters is retraced, backwards, in a series of 'Trouble with...' chapters that ends, of course, with dear ol' Eddie.

With any review, you're looking for the answer to at least one question: is it actually any good? *The Inflatable Volunteer* undoubtedly shows Aylett's way with words, his wit and violent one-liners. But if you're looking for the familiar delights of noir fiction, then look away.

Aylett doesn't expect you to sympathise with the characters or their machinations; and if you feel you can't get past the words, then actually you're missing the point. It is the words and how they're used that are clearly Aylett's main concerns. If there's a fault with this book, it's the fact that it's all too relentless and, ultimately, rather flat.

Not that Aylett seems to mind: 'A lot of bastards in this world don't know when they're getting away with a good thing,' says Aylett's narrator at one point. I can't help but feel that Aylett himself knows he's not among that number.

> rawdogscreeaming.com



VETERAN Gavin Smith

Gollancz, 473pp £18.99 hb/£12.99 tpb

Reviewed by Duncan Lunan

Gollancz is flagging Gavin Smith, from Dundee, as major new talent: "The most powerful SF debut since Richard Morgan's *Altered Carbon*...destined to become another SF superstar." There's a lot in *Veteran* to suggest they may be right, though the ongoing lists of weapons tend to get in the way of it. Just about every major scene has a build-up in which the characters kit themselves out with an extensive selection of hardware, which they proceed to use, and it took some time to establish that there was more to the book than that.

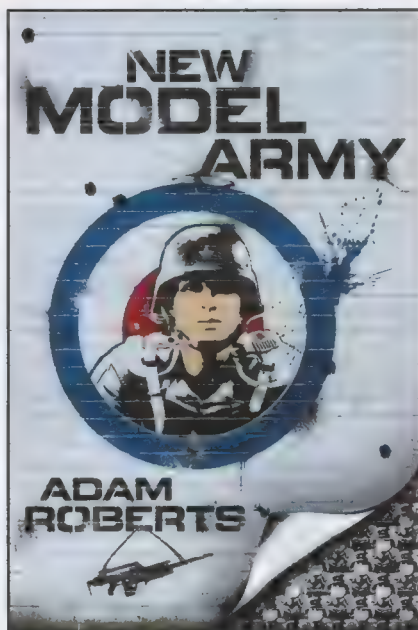
Three hundred years in the future, humanity has been at war for sixty years with a nonhuman enemy known only as Them. The conflict extends across interstellar space and we have lost settlements on planets of various stars, with the enemy now trying to penetrate the defences of Earth itself. The first-person narrator, Jakob Douglas, is a veteran not only of the conflict in the Sirius system but of a successful mutiny on a troopship returning to Earth, frustrating a ruling that the surviving cyborg troops were too dangerous to bring home and should be dumped in space. Jakob's implanted armour, weapons and sensors are all deactivated and he's on the skids in a settlement of derelict oil-rigs off Dundee, when he's reactivated to track down a

possible Them infiltration. The order comes from Rolleston, Jakob's former commander who gave or passed on the order for the dumping of the veterans; it's backed up by Rolleston's allegedly terrifying enforcer, the Grey Lady, who "may come back to haunt you" but is just one more heavily armoured killer when she does show up, late in the action.

When Jakob finds the infiltrator, it's befriended a teenage prostitute named Morag, with whom he goes on the run to seek out his former colleagues. His lack of motivation for doing so is a serious weakness. "I couldn't explain what I was doing, why I was carrying this thing... Nor did I have the slightest idea what I was intending to do with it," which turns out to be take it to his former colleagues and use its knowledge to build a programme called God which takes over the Internet, while being hunted through the remains of Hull, New York, Trenton, and thence to a space elevator base in the mid-Atlantic, winning most of the increasingly violent hand-to-hand conflicts and firefights at every stage. Rolleston's not unreasonable assumption that Jakob's under mind control turns out to be wrong, of course, and Morag and Jakob's instinct turns out to be right – just trust the Force.

Despite the plot weaknesses and the over-emphasis on weaponry, Gavin Smith produces a memorable array of characters among Jakob's fellow veterans and new allies. Still, their implants and their mechanical and biological ability to repair themselves, with occasional outside help, make them effectively immortal and reduce our empathy for them. Morag can die, but doesn't; the Grey Lady kills a pilot, but he's a bit player and his buddy carries on. Jakob is dying of radiation sickness, but at that level of technology, it's not clear why even that should be final.

The emphasis on high technology raises a more lasting problem. These people have interstellar drive, single-stage-to-orbit shuttles, and built-in lasers and railguns and mass drivers among their hand weapons, just for openers. What does it all run on – Zero Point Energy? There's so much energy on tap that it makes the 1950s forecasts for nuclear power seem like the Dark Ages. So why is anybody living in poverty and deprivation – is it part of the conspiracy which created and maintained the war, at the behest of shadowy human oligarchs called the Cabal? 'God' reveals all to the populace, but not enough of it comes our way for us to understand it.

**NEW MODEL ARMY****Adam Roberts**

Gollancz, 282pp, £12.99 tpb

Reviewed by John Howard

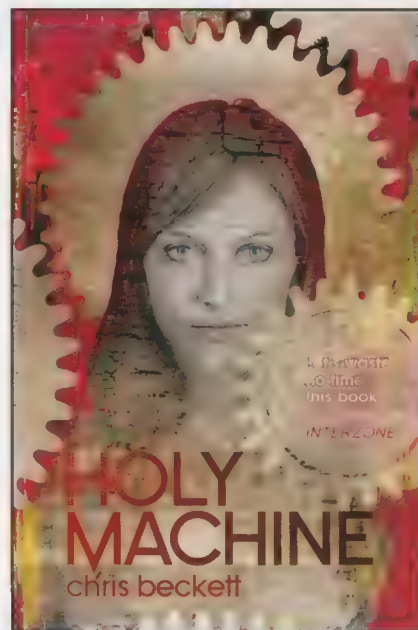
We're bombarded all the time with concepts of democracy. We're told there isn't enough of it (can there ever be enough?) or what there isn't working properly and needs to be reformed. The United Kingdom is generally regarded as being at least reasonably democratic; but not all of its institutions are, or, apparently, ever could be. For example, even if the civilian rulers of a nation's armed forces are democratically elected and accountable, the armed forces themselves can't be democratic as well, right? Or...? Adam Roberts builds *New Model Army* around this 'what if?' question.

In the not too distant future, the UK splits apart in the War of Succession when the Scottish government unilaterally declares the country's independence after refusing to accept the legitimacy of Prince Harry's accession to the throne. A nasty (is there any other sort?) civil war breaks out. Fighting spreads throughout the country and battles take place around the sort of safe Home Counties settings trashed once before by H.G. Wells in *The War of the Worlds*. Roberts exposes some shaky foundations under the green and pleasant homeland, along the lines of what was done, for example, by Christopher Priest in *Fugue for a Darkening Island* (1972) and James Lovegrove in *Untied Kingdom* (2003). We British show that we can join

the club and smash up the house and drive tanks all over the lawn with the best of them, the nation falling apart, just like any other benighted country.

The Scottish government hires a New Model Army (NMA) to fight on their side against the existing British Regular Army. A New Model Army is a sort of mercenary outfit, fighting for whoever employs it and pays it to. And it is a *polis*: an army the size of an 'antique Mediterranean city-state' – and as democratic as one. There are no command structures or officers; the soldiers buy their own kit and equipment, and look out for each other. Members keep in touch through wikis and continuously vote on strategy and tactics. The narrator of *New Model Army* is a member of Pantegral, the NMA fighting for the Scottish government. And Pantegral is very much a young, giant, and living body: four years old, ten thousand members strong, ready and willing to fight. New Model Armies turn out to be the scourge and despair of their regular army counterparts. Although outnumbered in size and equipment, they are able to win and win again, because they are superior bodies due to their fully democratic organisation. After the Battle of Basingstoke, Pantegral moves on to invade London. Eventually a ceasefire is signed, and the injured narrator leaves the NMA as it 'disassembles' itself. But the New Model Army dream isn't what it was, and NMAs everywhere start to lose self-control, as aging and changing bodies often do. The fit young giants crash around as if sleepwalking; and the functions that the narrator has been performing morph into something new.

If giants go on the rampage someone called Jack usually turns up sooner or later. But the slumbering giant can be made to wake up too, and in its great body of many members, woven and netted together, with each playing its democratic part, something else can rise up into consciousness. Any wannabe rhetoric of democratic vistas is, rather, transformed through an impressive visionary sequence of Europe – a European dream that expands out beyond continents and into their inhabitants. The key is whipped out of the pocket (luckily that was what was traded for instead of magic beans). The playground gate is unlocked and left open. *Wachet auf*, and is it whither or wither humanity? *New Model Army* is a violent and thoughtful book, a reflective novel that seldom stops for breath. And it's a very good read too.

**THE HOLY MACHINE****Chris Beckett**

Corvus, 294pp, £14.99 hb/£10.99 tpb

Reviewed by Peter Loftus

The more observant among you may remember a review for *The Holy Machine* way back in *Interzone* #198, when Tony Ballantyne heaped praise on the American release of the novel. Five years later, and thanks to the good people at Corvus, Beckett's debut has finally secured a UK publication. What better opportunity to put it under the microscope and see how it measures up?

The world of *The Holy Machine* has been sundered by a schism known as the Reaction, with the majority falling under the influence of religious fundamentalists who have banned all but the most primitive technology. Small enclaves of sanity and liberalism survive, but these are few and far between, and the grip of the huge techno-corporations means they are far from utopian.

George Simling is a lonely bachelor living in one such high-tech haven, Illyria (quite possibly a far-future version of Dubrovnik). George lives with his mother, Ruth, but she has more time for simulated living in Senspace than the real world and her son. A bit of an outsider, George finds solace and (inevitably?) love in the arms of a sex robot named Lucy. Before long, however, glitches in Lucy's behaviour show that she is developing consciousness. In fact, the same thing has been happening to robots all over Illyria, with the result that

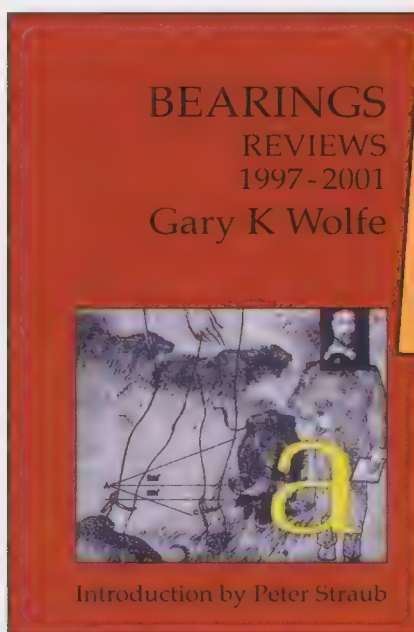
many of them are deserting their posts and slipping into the surrounding Outlands. When the powers that be resolve to combat the situation by wiping the memory of every robot they can lay their hands on, George realises that the only way he can save Lucy is to flee to the Outlands with her. The Outlands are not without their perils, though. The locals see robots as demons to be crucified, dismembered and burned at the stake.

The Holy Machine has been written with the lightest of touches. The prose is sparse yet elegant, and this, coupled with the brisk pace and tight plotting, means the chapters fly by. One of the strengths of Beckett's approach throughout the book is that he avoids stereotypes and simplifications. George is not the typical socially maladroit geek robo-fetishist we might expect, but a fully rounded character aware of his situation and the ramifications of his decisions. His struggle to make sense of the world around him and find his place there is central to the success of the novel. While we may not agree with the choices he makes, we are involved enough that we can sympathise with them. In the same way, Illyria is not an escapist techno-paradise, but a living city whose citizens strive to understand their relationship with the machinery (both social and technological) they have created. Similarly, the Outlands (the part we encounter is made up of Greece and neighbouring Balkan states) are not a primitive hell-hole benighted by the power of the church. People live, work, play and die there.

This balance and realism enables the reader to fully engage with and appreciate the issues raised in the novel. This is important, since one of the main themes, Religion vs Science, is a horse that many readers will feel has been sufficiently flogged already. It is a mark of Beckett's accomplishment that he has presented the topic in a manner that makes it fresh and stimulating.

On the down side, the plot moves so quickly that when momentous events happen in the wider world we don't get much chance to examine them. It is as if we are being chauffeured past at high speed. Some of the plot leaps are a little hard to swallow too – I won't give any spoilers, but Ruth's transition to 'Little Rose' is a case in point.

All in all, though, these are minor quibbles and detract very little from what is a beautifully crafted novel and a delight to read.



BEARINGS: REVIEWS 1997-2001

Gary K. Wolfe

Becon Press, 449pp, £16.00 tpb

Reviewed by Paul Graham Raven

How should one review a book of reviews? The constraints of deadlines mean that one is obliged to read a collection like *Bearings* in a way that may not ideally suit its purpose: critical collections, for this reader at least, are better dipped in and out of over time than (ahem) wolfed down in one lump.

That said, Gary K. Wolfe's reviews retain readability even when approached *en masse*, perhaps because of his approach to criticism, which – though not unique – is fairly rare: Wolfe begins each book dearly wanting it to *win*, and he'll give it every fair chance to do so on its own terms. We can assume that absence is a form of criticism in itself, but it's fun to watch him wander the genre landscape and give serious consideration to books that others might pass over. Point in case: a few of the sort of 'prophetic futurism' novels that people outside sf tend to think of as exemplary of it (and that those within tend to disdain with prejudice) are treated with respect, and always with that yearning for quality that characterises Wolfe's work.

That yearning is no secret; in his introduction, Wolfe states his belief that one should review "the book the author actually wrote rather than the book the reviewer wanted her to write" [7], and that he's more interested in mapping commonalities across the ill-defined

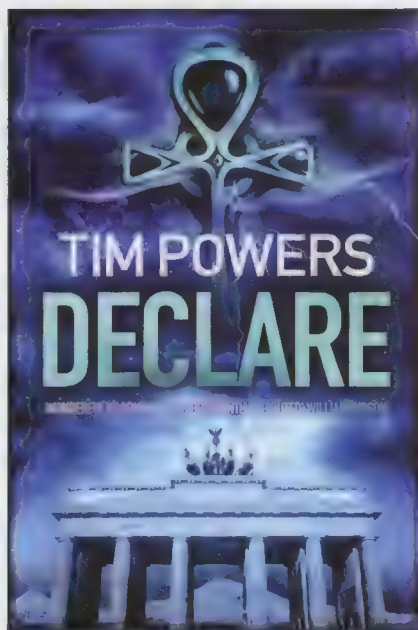


territories of genre than he is in building fences around them. Which isn't to say Wolfe won't call out failures when he sees them as such, or that he doesn't know the classic clangers and pitfalls of genre: when he remarks that Patricia Anthony isn't "out to create one of

those shaggy secret-history tales [...] to explain, say, the real origins of the baked bean" [43], it's the amiable cynicism of someone who has read plenty of stories *just like that*. Wolfe knows whereof he speaks, and has a lover's eye for genre – he accepts it, warts and all. He also understands that expectations of a book should be realistic, as in his discussion of Walter J. Miller Jr's sequel to the sf classic *A Canticle for Leibowitz*; hoping for it to equal or eclipse such a central text would be unreasonable, and leaving that aside gives Wolfe space to discuss the ways in which it succeeds.

You don't need to read a whole book of Wolfe's reviews to see he doesn't go in for stylistic pyrotechnics *à la* John Clute, late of this parish. But doing so allows you to see Wolfe's own wit emerge, gentle but firm, wryly smiling – comparing Stephen Baxter to Antonio Gaudi [143], for instance, or describing a graphically gruesome WW1 alternate history as a novel that "makes you aware of where you put your hand down" [131]. It also enables you to get a sense of flow, to hear the genre converse with itself through its texts over time. This, one suspects, is Wolfe's true passion; he speaks so that he has more opportunities to listen closely.

It would be remiss not to mention the index of *Bearings*, a wonderful effort that combines the hard-earned skills of a cataloguer with the specialist knowledge of the genre aficionado; by the same token, it would be remiss not to point out that another good proofreading pass might have caught most of the minor but disappointingly frequent typos and formatting slips that litter the book. But it should be remembered that collections like *Bearings* are predominantly labours of love for all involved, and the genre world would be a far darker place without them. Wolfe is a leading light of literary criticism in our field; not only would we be lost in his absence, we'd *not even know* that we were lost.

**DECLARE****Tim Powers**

Corvus, 576pp, £8.99 pb

Reviewed by Andrew J. Wilson

In 1986, Tim Powers said: "Sometime I'd like to write an espionage novel, a real murky, tangled, le Carré-Forsyth-type thing." That was the germ of *Declare*, which was eventually published in the United States fourteen years later. Now this award-winning dark fantasy is getting a long-overdue British edition at last, and the good news is that it has stood the test of time.

It's neither easy nor advisable to summarise the complex plot in detail, but some context is essential. In 1929, Andrew Hale, the bastard son of a defrocked nun and a mysterious father, is inducted into – and indeed adopted by – the British secret service at the age of seven. He later joins the Communist Party while up at Oxford, and is then recruited as a Soviet spy after a staged arrest and expulsion from university. Following Special Operations Executive orders, he enters Nazi-occupied Paris as a double agent and meets Elena Teresa Ceniza-Bendiga, codenamed 'ETC', the young Spanish Republican exile who will become the love of his life. He also begins to understand that sinister supernatural forces are at work in the world.

In his afterword, Powers acknowledges that he owes a debt to the work of John le Carré, but *Declare* is far from a simple Cold War spy pastiche. The seedy, dangerous and often counter-productive reality of undercover operations is used as a way

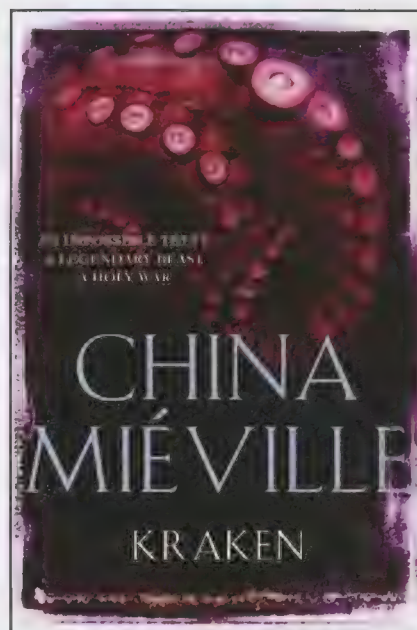
of exposing an even greater supernatural conspiracy involving a colony of djinn inhabiting the upper slopes of Mount Ararat. These fallen angels have played a deadly role in international intrigue since the days of the Great Game between the Russian and British empires. *Declare* is the Special Operations Executive's long-term operation to "establish the truth" about these awful pre-human entities – or in other, less-euphemistic words, to wipe them out once and for all.

Powers' measured and pitch-perfect prose steers his compellingly intricate narrative as he cuts back and forth in time and space. The story jumps between occupied Paris, post-war Berlin, Mount Ararat in both 1948 and 1963, and England and the Middle East across the course of Andrew Hale's troubled life. Another embodiment of Powers' trademark wounded hero, the protagonist's scars are psychological rather than physical. Hale is repeatedly confronted with guilt and regret as he tries to cope with the awful choices he has to make. What's more, he's haunted, sometimes literally, by none other than Kim Philby.

John le Carré wrote, "Love is whatever you can still betray. Betrayal can only happen if you love." In contrast, the real Kim Philby argued, "To betray, you must first belong." The tension between these two conflicting ideas is at the core of *Declare*. Powers' version of Philby is a splendidly nasty rendering, but the author always plays fair, never deviating from the known facts about this arch-traitor. Hale and Philby are opposites, but they find themselves increasingly entangled even as each becomes the other's nemesis. Elena Ceniza-Bendiga must also use both men to triangulate her own complex destiny.

Actual people and notable historical events are woven seamlessly into the fabric of the novel, a spine of realism that serves brilliantly as a lightning conductor for the speculative elements of the story, bringing the cosmic entities crashing down to earth. The djinn are all the more terrifying because they represent a profound metaphor for the terrible forces unleashed across the world in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, these fallen angels have a dreadful plausibility and an inhuman logic all of their very own. It is not so much that you willingly suspend your disbelief, more that Powers levitates your incredulity like a masterly stage magician.

Almost 25 years after its conception, this secret history of the secret service, a book in which "tradecraft meets Lovecraft", may well stand as Tim Powers' masterpiece.

**KRAKEN****China Miéville**

Macmillan, 481pp, £17.99 hb/Del Rey, 512pp, \$26.00 hb

Reviewed by Paul F. Cockburn

As a leading UK figure in the New Weird, multi-award-winning China Miéville has developed a reputation for many things: a strong political intelligence and a tendency to treat the fantastique very seriously indeed; a highly distinctive 'voice' that, as a reader, you'll either love or find impossible to stay with; and, perhaps most intensely of all, an innate passion for London – be it the physical city of streets, buildings and congestion charges or the imaginative city of myths and dark legends beneath the grime of the everyday.

At least in terms of his writing, though, Miéville is less well known for both his love of giant squids and a light comedic touch. *Kraken* may start out as a book about a mildly 'odd' robbery at the British Museum, but it fairly quickly takes a turn for the utterly bizarre when Goss and Subby, two rather nasty pieces of the Capital's undead criminality, 'unfold' themselves from a small cardboard box.

The central character, and general 'innocent out of his depth' (who, of course, everyone else thinks is vitally important in the scheme of things; it would be a spoiler to suggest whether he really is or not) is Billy Harrow. A relatively young British Museum curator and squid expert, it is Billy who, one morning, discovers that, somehow, the institution's prized giant squid *Architeuthis* has been stolen – and

we're talking not just all eight metres of its preserved hide, but also the giant tank of preserving fluid in which it lay.

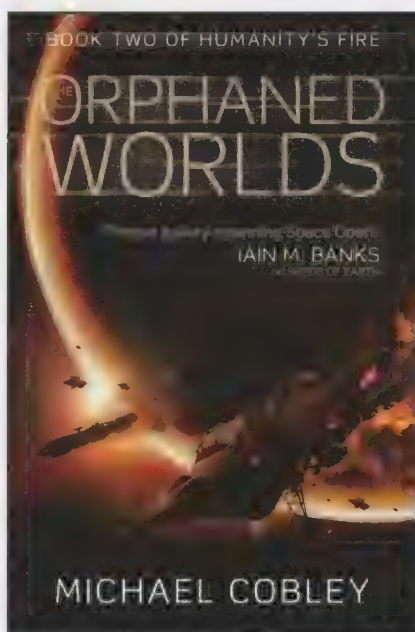
Remarkably quickly, Billy finds his perspective of the city in which he lives shifting; and, by following him, we readers are dragged into a typically Miévilian London Netherworld of secretive religious cults, magic, and a host of characters including a truly chilling occult gang boss leader called the Tattoo who is incarnated as, well, a tattoo on another man's skin. For the End of the World is coming; it's just not quite certain whose End of the World it's going to be.

The reader is certainly helped along the way by Miéville's conscious understanding that what he's describing is wonderfully bonkers; not only is there the abundance of puns, in-jokes and pop-cultural references woven into the novel, but also the genuine, at times unsettling weirdness that builds up around the main characters. These include some devout squid worshippers, the officers of the Fundamentalist and Sect-Related Crime Unit (including the foul-mouthed, unapologetically snarky Kath Collingswood who, alone among her colleagues, seems to understand just how bad things could get), and Wati, a strike leader from the spirit world who in the course of the book inhabits everything from huge bronze monuments to a Captain Kirk action figure.

Over the top? Absolutely, but the tale is told with such genuine verve and energy that it is difficult to hold on to your disbelief; and it's not as if we're just talking about easy jokes and rude words. At one level, Miéville is simply having fun producing a homage to, and critique of, Urban Fantasy (squirrels as 'freelance' familiars, for example); on another, though, he's questioning religious mania – "Not many cults have had their reformation" – and the inability of conventional authorities to protect us from the extremists in a post-9/11, post 7/7 terrorist age. All while gently still taking the piss out of *Star Trek/X-Files/Harry Potter* fans.

Although there's plenty of weird stuff going on to keep most readers interested, there are nevertheless moments when the characters – and Billy Harrow in particular – seem an insufficient foundation for a novel of this length, while the comparably sluggish climax suggests an author who was having just too much fun on the journey.

Overall, though, this is an irreverent, funny and playful novel, full of frenzied action, that is genuinely a New Weird popcorn blockbuster of the first order.



THE ORPHANED WORLDS

Michael Cobley

Orbit, 467pp, £10.00 tpb

Reviewed by Juliet E. McKenna

Humanity's lost colonists have rediscovered each other only to find they're pawns in a much bigger fight. Picking up from *Seeds of Earth*, this second volume of Cobley's *Humanity's Fire* trilogy is another well-crafted tale drawing on science fiction's decades-deep richness. Malign computer intelligences intent on fulfilling their programming make HAL look like an amateur. Resistance fighters on a forested world use rocks, sticks and wits against

armoured galactic troopers. Meanwhile, their allies search space and hyperspace for allies and the technical know-how to salvage this deteriorating situation. Hand-to-hand combat in hard vacuum and widescreen space battles demand Technicolor imagination.

As before, Cobley's inventiveness equally reflects our own day, with multimedia news and an omnipresent dataweb complicating life for protagonists and antagonists alike. Want to find your enemy? Log on to the shiptagger forums! What about the nanotechnology we've barely explored? Cobley extrapolates its potential for good and ill, with wit and deft neologisms.

Classic SF elements gain depth and substance through practical analysis, such as the difficulties besetting an outclassed insurgency and the limitations of AI vulnerable to flaws in its original programming. Not that Cobley draws comforting conclusions from this or the implications of a self-aware world, as this story explores relationships and conflicts between individuals, technology and nature, at all levels from the personal to the societal.

Those individuals, human, alien and artificial, are the heart of this story. Their struggles weave a many-stranded narrative that demands and deserves attentive reading. We share in their successes, apprehensive about the cost, when there are worse things than death to fear. With surprises to the final pages, the story takes a breath poised between hope and despair. I look forward to being entertained, startled and prompted to think by the concluding volume.

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LASER FODDER TONY LEE

EXAM

THE LIVING DEAD AT THE
MANCHESTER MORGUE

MULAN: WARRIOR PRINCESS

HIDDEN FORTRESS:
THE LAST PRINCESS

THE LOVELY BONES

WAREHOUSE 13 SEASON ONE

ASHES TO ASHES SEASON THREE*

CARGO*

PERCY JACKSON & THE OLYMPIANS:
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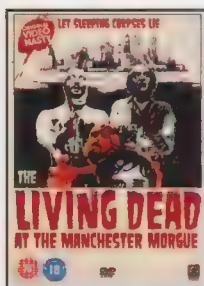
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Stuart Hazeldine's **Exam** (DVD/Blu-ray, 7 June) is about eight strangers gathered in a bunker and given 80 minutes to answer one question. Winner gets dream job as assistant to CEO of pharmaceutical corporation Biorg. Apparently set during a global pandemic, mixed candidates engage in teamwork/competition staged as theatrically dynamic ensemble piece, exploring mind games and mild paranoia that unfortunately neglects to push back genre boundaries or test limits of moral conventions beyond TV movie style terrors which prove individual's commitment to getting ahead. Baffled by blank exam papers, the diverse group vandalise room fixtures in search of questions/answers to their predicament, in psychological dramas played out in real time. *Exam* cannot avoid being at least slightly pretentious. It's a low-budget niche movie enacted comfortably within narrow production constraints. It's very clever but not ingenious, intriguing without being fascinating and entertainingly intense if never crazy enough to be considered a 'chamber horror' like *Cube*, the *Saw* franchise, *Breathing Room*, or *The Killing Room*. Having previously done scripting chores for 2003's *Riverworld* (Kari Skogland's TV adaptation of Philip José Farmer's Hugo-winning novel *To Your Scattered Bodies Go*), Hazeldine debuts as writer-director on this British puzzler, and it's a treat for aficionados of intelligent mystery-thrillers that skilfully avoid senseless gore and violence.



Although shot partially in the UK, Jorge Grau's zombie classic **The Living Dead at the Manchester Morgue** (aka: *Non si Deve Profanare il Sonno dei Morti*, 1974) is a nifty Spanish production, getting a welcome re-release on DVD (7 June). Even if it's clearly inspired by *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), Grau's cult movie influenced *28 Days Later* (2002). This sci-fi horror deploys full cinematic toolkit of undead lore, as it presents varied scenarios, from besieged farmhouse and crypt of terrors

to infants affected by same alleged combo of industrial pollution/experimental ultrasonic pest killer. Police investigate murder of nature photographer, obviously in wrong place at wrong time, but detective inspector (Arthur Kennedy) assigned to case ignores valid reports of red-eyed ghouls from cemetery or hospital mortuary being responsible for gorily violent death of a uniformed officer. Desecration of graves/human remains at Southgate graveyard (where eternal rest isn't forever) is blamed unfairly, after all, on filthy drug-crazed Satanist hippies. Black comedy segues to macabre weirdness, then back again, often punctuated by sudden attacks from shambling flesh-eaters. George (Ray Lovelock, *Murder Rock*) becomes the unlikely hero who is eventually shot dead by Kennedy's prejudiced cop. Edna (Cristina Galbó, giallo *What Have They Done to Solange?*) frets over the fate of her junkie sister and has narrow escapes from stalker zombies, in between frequent bouts of hysterical screaming, which excludes her from heroine status. Thrumming and howling sound effects delineate moments of menace and frenzy. Mortuary lorry carrying several windowed metal coffins and the apparent determination of 'Dept. of Agriculture' techies to extend range of bug-exterminating radiation across midlands, hints at sinister government conspiracy, but it seems that incompetence or stupidity is at fault here, rather than any measure of purposeful evil. George's burning of undead hordes and attempted sabotage of machinery fails, yet in small consolation he returns after death for revenge against his fascistic murderer. If viewers can identify with zombies, it makes for an unsettlingly bleak ending.



"Heed the Emperor's command... With united spirit, we will defeat the dog invaders!" Yet another Asian 'historical' movie of warfare/heroic adventures, in confrontations between empire and nomadic tribes, **Mulan: Warrior Princess** (DVD/Blu-ray, 21 June) is based on the Chinese legends about Hua Mulan (Wei 'Vicki' Zhao, *Red Cliff*, *So Close*), who earnestly joins the army in her father's place and becomes a fighting/moral heroine, rising eventually to rank of

general officer, while somehow managing to keep her gender a secret during 12 long years of strife. Directed by Jingle Ma (and, reportedly, Wei Dong), this is an often filmed tale – including Disney's unaccountably popular 1998 animated musical fantasy version – although here its folkloric elements are further enhanced by central battlefield romance as Mulan falls in love with fellow soldier Wentai (Kun Chen, who also starred alongside Zhao in Gordon Chan's 2008 vampire thriller *Painted Skin*). Hu Jun, of *Red Cliff* and forthcoming *Water Margin* remake, is great as irascible chief villain Mendu. Though full of incident, the combat scenes lack energy. Narrative pace is weakened somewhat clumsily by CGI montages that reveal scale but add nothing much to a simplistic plot, which avoids telling little details necessary for individualism to make strong dramatic impact, despite moodily emotive sorrow and habitual noble sacrifice. However, these faults may be forgivable considering the storyline's novelistic/poetic ballad sources. Jingle Ma, maker of that cheesy comedy actioner *Tokyo Raiders* and entertaining sci-fi superhero adventure *Silver Hawk*, is hardly a filmmaker with any notable artistic vision, so *Mulan* is only competent and pleasing without ever being impressive or compelling. If you enjoyed Ching Siu-tung's *An Empress and the Warriors* (with Donnie Yen, Kelly Chen), this is pretty much just more of the same.



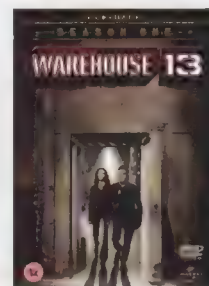
It's the worst kept secret about *Star Wars* that George Lucas admits having borrowed part of his 1977 movie's plot from Akira Kurosawa's samurai classic *Hidden Fortress* (1958), now remade as *Kakushi toride no san akunin* (2008), unleashed on DVD, 28 June, as **Hidden Fortress: The Last Princess**. Directed by upstart Shinji Higuchi – genre previous includes disaster-movie remake *Japan Sinks* (aka: *Nihon chinbotsu*, 2006) and retro sci-fi/submarine flick *Lorelei* (2005) – adds several gory action scenes to original's comic sensibility, without increasing the familiar story's charm or values. Like *Mulan*, it's a pick 'n' mix remake. Princess Yuki (Masami Nagasawa, one of fairy twins in *Godzilla: Final Wars*) embarks on hazardous journey through

enemy territory, carrying war chest of gold bullion, accompanied by Rokurota (Hiroshi Abe, notable Thai-fu *Chocolate*), her faithful samurai bodyguard. En route, they encounter farcical double-act of Takezo (Jun Matsumoto, from boy-band Arashi) and Shinpachi (Daisuke Miyagawa) who join albeit reluctantly at first royal cause against aggressors, led by glowering medieval 'Darth Vader', scar-faced black-armoured Lord Takayama. Appalled by constant oppression where poverty is rife, privileged Yuki learns humility and higher grace through deception of espionage and sudden tragedy. Left distraught by suffering of common folk and peasants, she finds trust has to be earned and loyalty is priceless. Eventually captured, carted off to the 'Death Star' (sorry, bad guys' secret fort; still under construction), Yuki and Rokurota face overwhelming odds... However, with just refresher-course plotting you can easily guess the rest. It's lively and vaguely satisfying, but never enthralling. Despite appealing swordplay action heroics, director Higuchi's dull framing refocuses characters for obvious/pompous development arcs, fielding unlikely 'romance' between lowly miner Takezo and regal Yuki. Well, perhaps it's unavoidable that any *Hidden Fortress* rewrite would mimic aspects of *Star Wars*, but it is disappointing/worrying that Asian cinema – once a marvellous abundance of fresh ideas – seems to be copying Hollywood's mistakes with mainstream productions failing because of this churn of depressing remakes, with little to commend them and no clearly revisionist approach to revisiting such material whatsoever.



American teenager Susie (Saoirse Ronan, *City of Ember*) is killed by neighbourhood paedophile Harvey (Stanley Tucci, *The Core*). She goes directly to a personal heaven, watching from above as her family almost falls apart, and her younger sister becomes the killer's next potential victim... Based on Alice Sebold's novel, **The Lovely Bones** (DVD/Blu-ray, 28 June) is directed by Peter Jackson. The story's set in 1970s, which denies it any contemporary style or much social relevance. The period is presented as 'another world', albeit with

accessible reality, just as Susie's afterlife is otherworldly: all sweetness/light, rainbows/butterflies, as if to compensate for a despicable crime inflicted upon her – a private firmament made for dreaming away eternity along blue-sky event horizon stretched between CGI'd heaven and blandly suburban Earth. It's a fantasy hazily reminiscent of Vincent Ward's painterly realms in *What Dreams May Come* (1998), which almost insists the killer has done Susie a favour, as she's not just dead and gone but gone away to find perfect happiness in a better place. Bundled with narrative clichés and stereotyped characters burdened with terribly hackneyed dialogue, this supposedly 'wondrous' domain helps to sink the whole film from tragic drama into soporific delusional ethereality. Yet more faults like the leisurely pace, an overlong run-time (129 minutes feels more like three stupefying hours), and limited suspense that's undermined further by sheer predictability of a weak plotline, might leave fans of Jackson's magnificent *LOTR* trilogy and/or his early horror films pondering what's happened to his creative ambitions and sense of humour. (Well, on that last point, this film benefits from Susan Sarandon providing hammy comic relief as Susie's alcoholic granny.) *The Lovely Bones* is Jackson's return to vengeful whimsy of *Heavenly Creatures* – without blood splatter or literary bent – avoiding increasingly sinister darkness that characterised his classic *The Frighteners*, while succumbing to gross sentimentality that here mistakes avoidance of genre issues (murder's reported, not depicted) for appropriate family entertainment. One sequence displays a fabulous coastline that's cluttered with life-size ships from giant broken bottles, and this image lingers afterwards, representing how this cinema failure is wreckage on alien shores.



Located via genre maps of sci-fi TV industrial estates where likes of *Sanctuary* and *Fringe* (not to mention *Torchwood* and *Primeval*, etc) perform comparable esoteric business, **Warehouse 13: Season One** (DVD boxset, 28 June), a rare success for Syfy channel, is basically *X-Files* lite. Created by Brent Mote and Jane Espenson, it slackly follows offbeat conventions established by

'Area 51' flick *Hanger 18* (1980), *Twilight Zone* episode *Wong's Lost and Found Emporium* (1985), slick *Men in Black* spoofs, and *Lost Room* series (#211), with a comprehensive macguffin stash, most notably resembling the vast wonderland shed of crated treasures from *Indiana Jones* movies. Recruited secret service duo combines insights of proficient/analytical heroine Myka (Joanne Kelly, *Vanished*) and comical/intuitive chump Pete (Eddie McClintock, who looks like young James Garner), teamed with unhelpfully secretive and overly intense curator/caretaker Artie (Saul Rubinek, *Frasier*), assigned or exiled to rusting bulk of a storage bunker – reportedly designed by Thomas Edison, Nikola Tesla, M.C. Escher – in South Dakota badlands. Gifted with 'steampunk' devices of Bakelite sci-fi (electric ray-gun, b&w videophone in tin pencil case), federal agents become new instruments of conspiracy intrigues, often with tragicomic irony or twisty codas, maintaining such US government cover-ups as Mulder and Scully were dead set on exposing. Prototype gadgets, artisan creations (not unlike Rambaldi's fantastical crypto-artefacts in *Alias*) make

for a sinister stockpile where "inventory kicks up a little static" of ball lightning and WH-13 contents are sensitive to negative energy (as when Pete and Myka argue). Entire intact rooms are kept in lockup with dial-up access. There's even a duplicate of local B&B house. "I'm no expert, but..." as jokey science fiction it's slanted for about the same "creep-tastic" level as *Ghostbusters*. Houdini's wallet escapes from captivity, the 'resurrected' Lucrezia Borgia is described as "dead Italian cougar", Studio 54's laser-blasted glitter-ball unleashes wicked 'Alice' from Lewis Carroll's mirror, Sylvia Plath's typewriter drains people "of energy and will to live", while Poe's notebook leaks prose of crawly ink on reader's flesh (you may guess that someone gets walled in alive while a deadly pendulum swings above bound heroes), and Albert Hofmann's reading spex feed acid-trip blitz to visual cortex without popping LSD. Guest stars include two *BSG* remake alumni – Tricia Helfer plays an FBI agent, and Michael Hogan portrays Myka's dad (a bookshop owner) – both adding character-based fun to questing investigations. Quirky satire taps into a fascination with alchemy/folklore that

resonates with urban mysteries of 'magical' technology as Fortean logic applies frequently to rejected dead-end inventions/failures of imagination. Fiddly puzzles, anachronistic paraphernalia, whimsical notions, sometimes just paranormal gibberish sketched between mischief and malevolence. Time-travelling warlock (remember Steve Miner's movie?), spinal-parasite cyborg, implosion grenades, haunted prison, invisibility, are typical miracles. Some difficult missions appear to need unique capabilities of Sapphire & Steel, so it's no surprise that mortals like Pete and Myka become frustrated, dealing with uncanny disturbances/occult happenings, or botching solutions to weird threats from beyond. Regular supporting characters include naïve young techie Claudia (Allison Scagliotti), who's geeky but witty, and WH-13's formidable overseer, the mysterious Mrs Frederic (C.C.H. Pounder, *End of Days*), who might be a teleporter. Of course, Artie's nemesis plus 'surprise' traitor bring cliff-hanger finale. Self-destruct klaxon blares, fadeout, to be continued...with (hopefully!) more above-average quality entertainment as season two shipment unpacks on TV in July.

ANIMATION EXPRESS

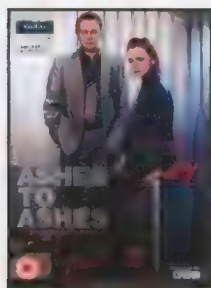
Ralph Bakshi's **Wizards** (Blu-ray/DVD, 24 May) was made in 1976 yet today it still confounds expectations as genre animation. With its varied stylings, this is more than simply post-holocaust Tolkienesque kitsch, it's an elf-punk movie produced before SF had properly formulated cyberpunk as either subgenre or 'movement'! Millennia after science and technology were outlawed, warmongering mutant barbarians versus elves and fairy magic sees renewal of conflict from gloomy land of Scortch, where neo-Nazi Blackwolf plots downfall of his wizard brother Avatar, in kingdom of Montagar, using recently discovered 'dream machine' (cine projector for which the sky is a screen!) as ultimate weapon of dark powers. Blackwolf sends red-garbed ray-gunslinger assassin Necron 99, riding on his two-legged chicken-horse through futuristic western scenes, but this crimson terminator is 'reprogrammed' by Avatar as the herald 'Peace' against blitzkrieg mecha opposed only by love. Wannabe fairy queen Elinore, whose seeming defection/betrayal weakens both faerie defences and ageing lovesick Avatar's

resolve, is a memorable heroine. Battle scenes mix paralysing terror and grotesque horror in a catalogue of stark imagery... Although the technical quality of some animation here is basic at best, director Bakshi's innovative aesthetics and astute low-budget creativity employs a range of vividly coloured figures on a wide variety of background artworks, plus live-action stock footage and rotoscoping techniques on found photos and WWII newsreel clips. The voice-over narration combines with frequent montage sequences, granting storytelling mode a 'picture book' appeal, complete with comic asides. If this movie's quite inadequate budget (Bakshi admits that he was forced to spend much of his director's fee to complete the project successfully) results in a few minor practical failings, there can be no

doubt about this filmmaker's progressive ambitions overall. It's quite probable that *Wizards'* scenario influenced Cameron's *Avatar* blockbuster.

With all the technical polish and slickness that Bakshi rejected in favour of 'heart' and imaginative solutions to narrative problems, superhero adventure **Astro Boy** (DVD/Blu-ray, 31 May) is a megabuck product of glossy 3D CGI, based on manga by Osamu Tezuka, who created the titular character in 1963. Whereas in terms of genre content over style *Wizards* was years ahead of its time, *Astro Boy* is decidedly retro fare. Here, the sky-borne Metro City is urban utopia for sequestered humanity using robots for slave labour. David Bowers' direction is scarcely interested in modern sci-fi concerns, so he just hacks into same Disneyfied themes





One door opens, another closes. Begun as a *Life on Mars* spin-off, *Ashes to Ashes* proved to be superior cross-genre TV to its strange cousin. **Ashes to Ashes: Season Three**

(DVD, 5 July) wraps up varied tragicomic timewarp adventures of detective Alex 'Bolly' Drake (Keeley Hawes, former *Spooks* mainstay), again teamed with nation's favourite urban antihero/control freak DCI Gene 'Guv' Hunt (Philip Glenister, *Demons*), in spite of a brief parting of ways at close of season two, when Alex returned home, waking from a coma, yet haunted by Hunt. Accused of shooting Alex, Gene goes abroad: "The Isle of Wight – that was shit". (Ah, I do remember!) Now, it's 1983. Dream sequences are pop videos. Alex still talks to radios/TV sets (no change there). Gory spectre of a bloodily scarred policeman lurks at dramatic turn points. Most of the supporting cast see stars like edge of the world is a virtual night. Quattro's in top gear, but time's running out... What's most

surprising is that, not only is *ATA* better than *LOM*, but, paradoxically, although *LOM* was obviously inspired partly by *The Prisoner* (1967), it's spin-off *ATA* which surpasses its predecessor to become a fascinating, worthwhile meditation upon *The Prisoner's* themes, and then also manages to field some complex genre ambiguity (a peculiarly metaphysical transcendence) that even closing chapter of *The Prisoner's* disappointing remake (#228) failed to explore. Anyway, back to *ATA's* clever plots. Alex invents speed-dating to help catch a lonely-hearts killer. There's an effective tale of serial arson for Thatcher's re-election day. Scandalously, *Blue Peter's* garden/fish-pond is blithely 'vandalised' by Hunt's own brand of lawless tactics on London back streets. New bloke, antagonistic DCI Jim Keats (Daniel Mays, *Bank Job*, *Plus One*), audits Fenchurch East CID, urging curious Alex to investigate *LOM* protagonist Sam Tyler's suspicious death to verify Hunt's role in it. Knuckle-draggers of Manchester's trog division visit Hunt's manor/briar patch to upset apple carts of plod politics, but blatant macho male-bonding clichés prevail. Prison rioting uncovers another

offbeat conspiracy, resulting in one notable fatality. South African 'terrorism' spills over into UK. Never mind, our detectives are dancing to Spandau Ballet. Indeed, 1980s' music/telly landmarks/cultural riffs are scattered about like celebrity guide map refs, while Commodore PET's green-screen graphics and VHS versus Betamax débâcle frame a techno history. In *LOM*, Britain's treasured acerbic wit/fascist brute Gene Hunt was, primarily, only another cheesy *Sweeney* caricature. However, opposite the delectable Ms Drake, Hunt's socially compromising/risible misogyny is, ironically, what grants his egotistical blustering character greater depth here. What made the US remake of *LOM* preferable to its home-grown source was presence of Harvey Kietel (famous as *Bad Lieutenant*), and plain fact that American version had richer diversity of TV cop shows (not just *Starsky & Hutch*) to draw upon for touchstone influences or viewer/fandom recognition. If Glenister's take on Gene 'Genie' was merely cartoonish satire in Brit *LOM*, he did at least mature his brusquely appealing characterisation of Hunt from simple fount of one-liners into the tolerable chauvinist of *ATA* – even

of *Pinocchio* which previously informed some of Spielberg's oeuvre, especially *A.I.* (2001). Apart from retaining oddities like the boy hero's curious haircut (ah, it's not horns, but gel, explains Toby), there are a few other constant distractions amidst character designs originally sketched for 2D comics that simply look too daft, like a short doctor whose nose appears somewhat larger than his braincase. Remade as new super-powered robot by his grieving father, dead kid Toby is "too good to be true" says the corrupt repairman, who isn't fooled by exiled Astro's masquerade as human on the scrap-yard surface (calling Wall-E, to help clean up this mess!), where 'lost boy' befriends Trashcan 'doggie' for yet another risibly predictable waste of animation's anthropomorphism. A robot lib 'front' may adhere to Asimovian laws, if they could actually count up to three (or four?). As it is, they simply 'dream' of wilful freedom sought by angsty droid of *I, Robot* (2004), and become stuck in purely knockabout slapstick comedy with Pythonesque subroutines like 'what have humans ever done for us?' Climactic duel of cool action sees prodigal Astro tackle a monstrous Peacekeeper robot, capable of Borgish

assimilation, before a supposedly joyous happy ending depending on father and son reconciliation with a life-after-death twist. Gosh!

Splash (1984) for pre-schoolers, Hayao Miyazaki's magical eco-fable *Gake no ue no Ponyo* (2008) arrives on DVD/Blu-ray (7 June) as **Ponyo**. Clearly, I'm not intended audience for Studio Ghibli anime like this, especially when it's served up in painfully twee mode ('refreshingly innocent', my arse!), with an insufferably 'cute' theme song. King of the oceans is more Nemo than Namor, losing 'talking goldfish' offspring from his submarine yacht, when one little fishy eschews being "pure forever": growing legs, arms, hands and feet, mutating/evolving as five-year-old girlfriend for lonely Sosuke, who only communicates with his ship-captain dad via Morse code. A guided tsunami enables former-human Fujimoto to retrieve mermaid Ponyo, for playful continuation of underwater enchantments while revelations of drowning-world plot add brief note sinister vengeance against pollution, but seriousness is quickly forgotten when Ponyo comes running back

on wave crest to be reunited with Sosuke. When the boy's island homeland is flooded overnight, fate of entire planet rests with toddlers' romanticised journey to 'rescue' Sosuke's mother. Despite genre references to *Water Babies* (1978) and *Cocoon* (1985), this 21st century variant remains too old-fashioned, its animation locked into traditional fantasy style. SF elements – like DNA transfer, reappearance of ancient (extinct?) fish after the deluge – sit uneasily with its quaint seaside atmosphere and story of childhood friendship in dreamy scenes of supernatural benevolence. Yes, it's all quite charming, but also necessarily unsophisticated to please younger viewers easily spellbound by onslaught of pastel washes, which, like too much ice-cream, gave me a headache. *Ponyo* is watchable, of course, but doesn't really warrant the gushing praise that certain otherwise notable critics have showered it with. Too many adults may confuse parental appreciation of their children's delight in movies such as this with genuine family-viewing appeal. Whereas *Astro Boy* benefits from some mild socio-political/sci-fi comment, *Ponyo* wallows in bland magic. It is anime for kiddies only.

if typically eggcorny sarcasms remained the Guv's defining tic. Right, catch a Euro-scum gang of blaggers, then we're off down the boozier. In this way-station/purgatory for sadly lost souls, they all "can be heroes," asserts Bowie's classic song over fadeout. Alex's young daughter Molly seems almost forgotten until the ultimate episode. *Sapphire & Steel* is name-checked and, if anyone recalls just how oddly that masterclass of weird mystery ended, it's a brazen clue about ATA. So, what's all this really about? Is it purely sci-fi/western metaphorical storytelling about 'second chances' and temptations of evil with an afterthought-provoking, potentially unhappy ending? Does every British copper's moral life journey lead to a 'heavenly' pub like the Railway Arms? Well, as Alex's rather bemused narration admits for this final season intro, "your guess is as good as mine." Perhaps that's exactly as it should be; 'time capsule' fun, anachronistic heroes, magic bullet, and all...

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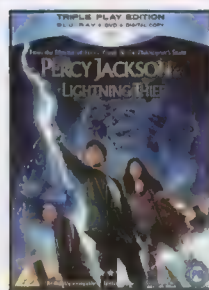


Although not genuinely dystopian in tone (a faint hope remains), Swiss drama **Cargo** (DVD/Blu-ray, 5 July) – filmed in German – concerns an industrialised future in space

that doesn't actually work in humanity's favour. Launched from a gigantic cylindrical habitat – busy hub for Kuiper starships/system transports – enlisted medic Dr Laura Portmann (Anna-Katharina Schwabroh) boards cargo hauler *Kassandra*, going into a tank of gloom for hyper-sleep journey to Proxima Centauri. She's awake for a months-long shift of maintenance duties, though, working off passage like others vacating an ecologically ruined Earth, in exodus destined for idyllic (if we consider promo adverts honest) colony world of Rhea. We're back in a grimy hardware-orientated pioneering final frontier affect: of *Alien*, *Outland*, original *Solaris*, Marc Caro's *Dante 01*, Boyle's *Sunshine*, and recent clunker *Pandorum*. It's a depressing existence, for which Laura eats nutrient pastes in chilly, rundown and entirely impersonal environments

fit only for machines. Some things about *Kassandra*'s manifest do not add up, however. Soon, security officer Samuel Decker (Martin Rapold) joins Laura to help investigate reason behind their 'supply mission'. A crewman killed in a supposed accident has bionic eye implant which recorded his discovery that cargo is not construction materials but has biohazard seals on children's cryo-tanks. Unexpected movement of immense storage containers almost kills the determined heroine. Intrigues of the corporate conspiracy, which involves betrayal/VR simulations of Edenic paradise, unfold steadily. The first feature directed by Ralph Etter and Ivan Engler – maker of short genre film *Nomina Domini* (2000) – *Cargo* is essentially derivative in terms of its SF plot and content, but there's still plenty to ogle here in the mind-bogglingly epic visual design and excellent special effects, which are quite superb for such a reportedly low-budget production. It looks far better than Hollywood sci-fi movies costing over ten times as much! It's not very often that a space opera movie can honestly be recommended mainly for effects work instead of a literate story or gripping action sequences, but *Cargo* deserves to be seen for astounding scale and hugely impressive scope of its spectacularly engineered futurism.

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So, Zeus (Sean Bean) has had his lightning bolt nicked, eh? What a metaphor for loss of virile (omni-) potency! Chris Columbus, director of *Bicentennial Man* and the first couple of *Harry Potter* movies, returns to genre cinema with **Percy Jackson & The Olympians: The Lightning Thief** (DVD/Blu-ray, 5 July), which concerns the son of Poseidon, named Percy (Logan Lerman, *The Number 23*), prime suspect in theft of ultimate weapon, but swim champ kid doesn't even know that he's a demigod. School pal is really a satyr of sidekick variety. Mum Sally (Catherine Keener, wasted here) is kidnapped by a Minotaur just as Percy arrives safely at Greek 'boot camp' for teen heroes – all with absentee parents – where Percy learns about his

Aqua Man strengths, and commandant centaur Chiron (Pierce Brosnan) fails to resist the "real horse's ass" joke at his own four-legged expense. Hades (Steve Coogan – yes, but don't ask me why he sometimes looks like Frank Zappa!) crashes picnic, prompting Percy's new gang to quest for jade pearls, suitably equipped with lots of cool magic stuff. Primed for sneak peak at Medusa (Uma Thurman) with 'baleful' gaze and CGI hairdo, before night fight against Hydra in replica Parthenon where prepared Percy has minimal problems with further beheadings during action enacted in manner of computer-gaming adventure. Following 'buzz kill' visit to Las Vegas casino, our young heroes drive to underworld's entrance beneath Hollywood sign (of course!), where lady of hell's house Persephone (Rosario Dawson, *Sin City*) helps Percy recover stolen lightning, identify actual thief, and escape to eyrie home of gods. Immortals Poseidon (Kevin McKidd, *Last Legion*) and Athena (Melina Kanakaredes, *CSI: NY*) aren't given much to do in this variation of bildungsroman fantasy with richer-than-Harry-Potter mythology, that's completed by an aerial combat sequence launched from phallic symbol of Empire State building. Unfortunately, it doesn't stop there, ending rather too happily/wetly with another of Hollywood's interminably dire father-and-son reconciliation scenes! I hope Kenneth Branagh's forthcoming *Thor* (due 2011) doesn't fall into same trap of sentimentalism.



Spanish cinema delivered a couple of superb mysteries recently. Billed as 'Saw meets *Cube*', *Fermat's Room* (aka: *La habitación de Fermat*, 2007), and Nacho Vigalondo's eerie *Timecrimes* (aka: *Los cronocrímenes*, 2007), proved that many foreign pictures have a bright creativity/imaginative vitality that can transcend budgetary limitations. **Hierro** (DVD/Blu-ray, 26 July) is directed by Gabe Ibáñez as a psychological chiller with spectacularly tragic impact, boasting the sort of fabulously art house visuals that could turn many of Hollywood's most seasoned camera crews a livid green with envy. Maria falls asleep on a car ferry, waking in panic to find that five-year-old son Diego has vanished. Searches uncover

no clues, and leave single mother Maria emotionally crushed by weight of worry, while photocopying 'missing-kid' flyers. Her sister Laura (Bea Segura) is supportive but has a new baby of her own taking priority. Evocatively nightmarish glimpses into Maria's fevered subconscious, after she fails to identify boy in mortuary. Staying alone on El Hierro in Canary Islands, waiting for inquest's DNA test, Maria lurks on rundown caravan site where she believes Diego is held captive. A 'strange' German hag, reputedly local nutcase, keeps boy prisoner until Maria rescues him but there's more confusion over identity in final twist... This fine debut feature by former animator Ibáñez explores trauma of loss and inexorable descent into madness induced by denial of stalled grieving process. Gorgeous starlet Elena Anaya (*Mesrine*, Jaime Balagueró's *Fragile*, Dracula's vampire bride Aleera in *Van Helsing*) delivers a stunning performance as distraught, suspicious, brittle Maria. Hailed as wonderful new output from producers of *Pan's Labyrinth* and Bayona's *Orphanage*, this boasts class world class cinematography by Alejandro Martínez, who also shot Castañeda's spooky *KM 31* (*Black Static* #4). Effective as both character study of woman-beyond-edge-of-nervous-breakdown, and compelling 'abduction' mystery, *Hierro* is definitely worth your time.

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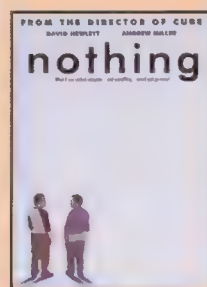


he also hopes to find the arsonist who killed his wife. Martin Scorsese's **Shutter Island** (DVD/Blu-ray, 2 August) starts as a ghost story with Kafkaesque intrigues concealing a mystery narrative of psychotic fantasy. Stranded on the rocky island by a hurricane, flooding and power failures add discomfort and misery to frustrated investigations as madhouse clichés abound. Stormy seas are symbolic of mental turmoil. Ted climbs on dangerous cliffs to reach cave of truth (another hindbrain icon), before he learns from unwelcoming

Dr Cawley (Ben Kingsley) and suspiciously bellicose Dr Naehring (Max von Sydow) that a psyche's "wounds can create monsters." This maintains handsome production standards, as expected from anything with Scorsese's name attached. The postwar mental hospital reeks of atmosphere, with moody lighting of dank corridors, and the antique spiral staircase in that promontory lighthouse. It also benefits from a thoroughly exceptional supporting cast (including Mark Ruffalo, John Carroll Lynch, Elias Koteas, Ted Levine, and Patricia Clarkson), but

Scorsese overcooks visual poetry of dream sequences, with paper showers/ash rains indoors. It's often been noted that camera movement approaching a closed door is the creepiest POV in all cinema, and here Scorsese milks that in excessively slow dolly shots to gates or entrances, open or shut. Radical psychiatric role-play lacks satirical/savage humours of *Shock Corridor* and *The Ninth Configuration*. If the film's easily anticipated downbeat ending seems cribbed from Gilliam's *Brazil*, that's simply because it's the most powerfully dramatic closure for this kind of psycho crime story.

BACKLIST



From director Vincenzo Natali – maker of cult 'prison' mystery shocker *Cube* (1997), noir spy-fi thriller *Cypher* (2002), and new cloning/chimera chiller *Splice* (2009) – surrealist comedy **Nothing** (2003) is otherworldly misadventure about virtuality in which a troubled protagonist wants everything to 'go away', but isn't happy when his wish actually comes true. It stars the director's old school chum David Hewlett (still best known as Dr McKay in *Stargate* TV shows) and Andrew Miller (*Cube*) and it is partly animated, but none the worse for either casting or mixed media format. Andy is an agoraphobic recluse who lives in one half of a semi-detached house, between a pair of motorway flyovers. His home is a mess, a noise magnet, an undes res without address, that's now scheduled for demolition according to local bylaws. Andy's long-time companion, 'loser' Dave, plans to leave his friend – much to Andy's dismay – but Dave loses his job when his 'girlfriend' frames him for embezzlement. Surrounded by bulldozers and cops, life seems untenable ("Leave us alone!") and that's when reality program crashes or pauses... Afterlife...? Purgatory...? "What's out there?" Just blank white space: an endless/invisible bouncy surface of 'tofu' – "Which, ironically, tastes like nothing." If this emptiness recalls that eerie 'white room' from *THX-1138*, don't be fooled. Dave and Andy aren't locked 'inside' something, they're locked out. Going to explore, finding no horizons in any direction, they lose their 'breadcrumbs' trail. Though overcoming his neuroses from a traumatic experience, Andy turns suicidal, faking his own death, reappearing from whiteout like Casper, unfriendly arguments settled by challenge of video-game duel. Having lost his console superiority, evicted Dave stakes his claim on a 'Daveania' nation, outlined by household junk. Alienation, territorialism, and juvenilia... Contemplation on Philidickian themes of questionable reality and memories edited for selfless or fearful reasons. Two people, searching for meaning in their lives, and testing/finding limits of friendship (probably helps if you don't pick scabs), while house vanishes in pieces. Belligerent ex-friends are 'hacking' away psychically at each other, so all that's left are two bruised heads. Yes, reduced to almost nothing themselves, Andy and Dave finally regain their frazzled sanities from the domestic 'bonfire' (unlike those feuding *Neighbours* of Norman McClaren's 1952 pixilation classic), but *Nothing* cleverly avoids mawkishness and, by dint of director's genuine artistry, Natali steers this well clear of being classed as a genre vanity project.

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IRON MAN 2

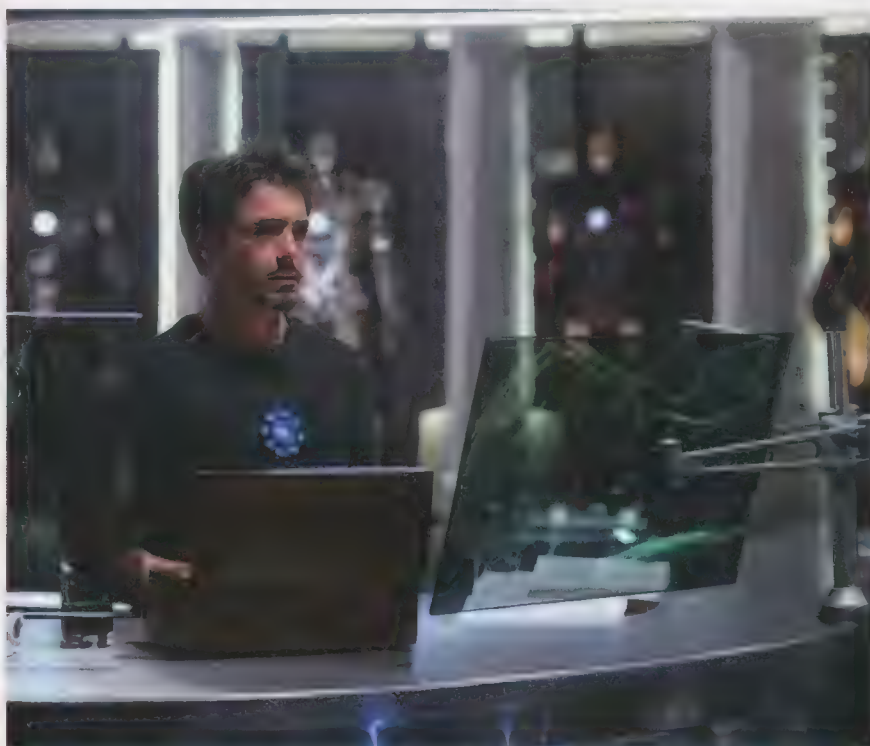
SHREK FOREVER AFTER

HOT TUB TIME MACHINE

TOOTH FAIRY

SPACE CHIMPS 2:
ZARTOG STRIKES BACK

PRINCE OF PERSIA:
THE SANDS OF TIME



IT'S NO MARVEL THAT LIFELONG MALE consumers of narrative media start to feel a certain sense of thwarted entitlement around the midpoint of act II. Isn't your life supposed to be more like a film, or a game, or a comic? Here you are in the biggest, most 3D, most interactive story universe of all, and you're trapped in a plotless first-person storyline amid an ensemble cast of billions, most of whom don't even recognise you as the lead, and with only one, intolerably downbeat ending. What happened to your right to replay, retcon, reboot? Aren't you supposed to be the hero? If, as they keep telling you, you can be whatever you want to be, why can't you be a god of thunder, or at least a billionaire playboy and part-time global supervigilante? Why are you constantly required to displace yourself from the centre of existence to accommodate the needs of women, when the world on the screens assures us that they're a narrative subspecies only there to serve, that they only matter as adjuncts to our own desires, and between you and me the jury's out on whether they're even conscious?

These are issues that particularly trouble the office of Tony Stark as the current ruler of the Marvel universe, supreme overlord of the mightiest empire in the global canon of story, and now, in **Iron Man 2**, second-term president of the one true narrative superpower in living cinema. "The world is enjoying its longest ever period of peace

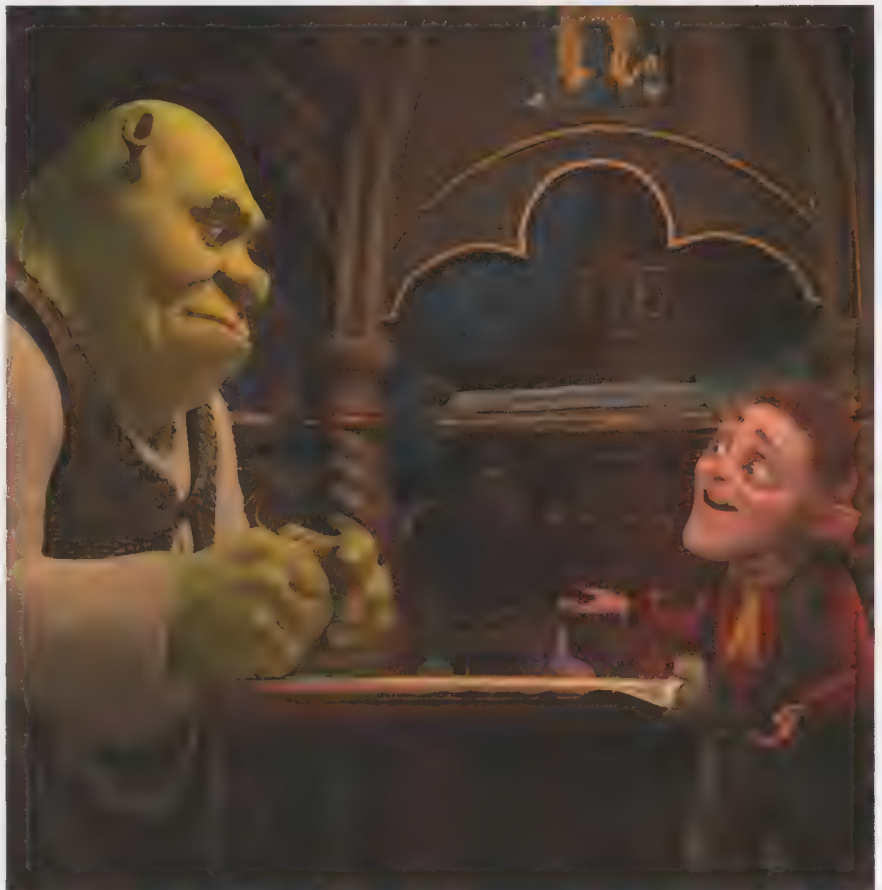
because of me," he informs the hearing, and he's not just talking about politics. "I'm your nuclear deterrent. I have successfully privatised world peace." Pixar can eat my shiny metal shorts. I'm the man, and I'm iron. I can do anything. I have my pick of characters and storylines from fifty years of canon; I look at Scarlett Johansson and say to my secretary, "I want one." I can retcon my relationship with my dad through a video séance so he loves me after all, despite having donned a metal suit and duffed me up in early drafts of the first film. So why is my heart breaking? Why don't I want to go home from the party?

Marvel's most resonant films – not necessarily their best, or their most successful, but the ones that become their most remembered and invoked – have been those that talk to and about their core audience, in the same way as Stan Lee's most enduring experiments found the sweet spot in the psyche of the silver-age comics reader and pushed. The problem with the *Hulk*, *Daredevil*, and *Fantastic Four* films, for all the merits of the latter at least as distillations of their concept and corpus, is that they were never interested in what it's like to be a fan: the sense of the teenage condition persisting through your entire adulthood, and the widening gap between your process-colour dreams of heroic achievement and the drabness of a world that sees only geekiness, introversion, poor social hygiene and

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body care. And what in the end has made the *Iron Man* films outperform the expectations raised by their character is not the moderately thoughtful development of the series' distinctive geopolitical engagement, or the painstaking assembly of a larger comics universe around the title, but the slow discovery of what *Iron Man* is most deeply about: the performance of manhood by middle-aged adolescents whose secret is that inside the big metal suit they're still little boys, dependent on the silent sufferance of fathomlessly capable women to keep their show on the road.

It's clear enough where this has come from, because as usual Hollywood is watching itself in a mirror as it pleasures itself, and this is top-to-bottom an actors' film. It's made by an actor from a script by an actor (*Mulholland Drive*'s Justin Theroux) brought in by the leading man, from a story co-devised by the star and his actor-director, and with much of the actual dialogue improvised up on set by the cast themselves. They're all clever people at their craft, and their performerly approach to the fx blockbuster, which pretty much killed the *Spider-Man* sequels, has undeniably contributed to the film's distinctive swagger and charm. But far more importantly, it's given the film a vision of adult masculinity and of what lies beneath the armour that comes above all from the experience of professional narcissists whose job is to pretend to be admirable. Its actual excavation of the character's canon is fairly industrial strip-mining, with the Mandarin and "Demon in a Bottle" lodes bypassed entirely in favour of radically reconceived versions of much lesser villains (and Mickey Rourke's Whiplash crudely photoshopped on to the backstory of the much more interesting Crimson Dynamo), and with Black Widow dangling free not only of her intricate web of canon storylines but also of any visible point, other than the obvious one of a three-picture cross-franchise deal on Scarlett in leathers. But the point is that all that's just costume. At its best, it's a sweet little indie rom-com in a jet-heeled weaponised suit, full of disarming small moments in the midst of noisy bigness. At the start of the interminable third-act battle, when *Iron Man* jets in from behind the audience to where Mickey Rourke's Hammeroid attack is just starting up on stage, Gwyneth Paltrow's long-suffering Pepper gives a look of resigned anticipation, born of long, long experience of cleaning up after her man.



Shrek Forever After takes the midlife angst of an overachieving sequel hero a step further by allowing him to renegotiate his narrative contract and reboot his own franchise *Star Trek*-style from the beginning. It's a film whose own story has been racked by doubt and backtracking, taking forever and a day even to decide on its own title – having started as *Shrek Goes Fourth*, and only making up its mind after the posters for *Shrek: The Final Chapter* had gone to press. But it turns out to have made interesting use of its own process of indecision. After a false start trying to develop a plot about Shrek's adjustment to fatherhood, Michael Arndt and the story team persuaded the studio to let them tear up everything except the Rumpelstiltskin trick, directly addressing the issues that were giving the franchise such a midlife by the inspired device of rewinding the clock to day zero and giving Shrek his old life back in a world where none of the first three films happened and those tiresome royal in-laws have contracted themselves out of existence, leaving only Princess Fiona in her ogre form as a cool and single Amazonian warrior queen to be romanced and won all over again with a 24-hour deadline. Like the *Iron Man*

sequel, it's a distinctly actorly kind of midlife crisis in which the problem is not any failure to fulfil your dreams, since you quite patently have, but the sense of losing your edge as a performer and becoming a tribute act to your former self ("I used to be a real ogre; now I'm just a jolly green joke") – only to make the career-destroying nightmare mistake of signing something you shouldn't without consulting your people. Can Shrek go from meet-cute to true love's kiss in a single day and night to meet his deadline for getting back to the future where it can still be a wonderful life? *Shrek* films don't obviously lend themselves to 3D, but the tyrannical Stiltskin has thoughtfully employed a praetorian guard of witches on readily-jackable broomsticks for the obligatory quota of soaring, poking, and chucking things out of the screen. (Cheekily, they use exploding pumpkins, which started as the trademark of mighty Marvel's own green broom jockey.) It's actually not a bad send-off for the series, with a brisk, decluttered plot and some snappy set pieces, and even the occasional recollection that there once was an unreconstructedly ogrely book by William Steig somewhere at the back of this far, far away.



A much closer-to-knuckle fable of midlife rebooting is **Hot Tub Time Machine**, in which John Cusack heads a posse of best buddies from the eighties who get to revisit the scene of their teenage triumphs and try to avert the disappointments of their subsequent lives through a retro weekend of gross-out body comedy and a utopian return to massively offensive pre-correct sexual politics. One of the bleakest feelgood comedies ever made, it serves up a vision of middle-aged masculinity as a desert of crashed dreams, broken relationships, and emasculated lives, in which the one reliable thing is your still more frozen-in-adolescence loser buddies from back when you thought you might really become the man you dreamed of being. "We were going to conquer the fucking world." But you didn't, and now you're trapped in a comedy life that begins with jolly jokes about catheter extraction gone wrong and fisting pets for stools, and progresses to projectile vomiting at squirrels and a hilarious running gag about severed arms. Josh Heald's cokesnorting original script has been significantly softened by Cusack's people, with the original stag-weekend setup replaced by

a new familial core about bonding with a teenage nephew. But it's still pretty vile, treating its female characters as objects of rutting and display who derail the course of your life once they start to aspire to a narrative of their own. Red Bull, whose product was fairly pivotal to the original plot, have wisely refused to lend their name to this, so that the plot now revolves around a fictional Russian energy drink homaging the eighties' most hilarious industrial whoopsadaisy with the name "Chernobly". Funny, funny, funny. At the end, needless to say, all the men get new versions of their lives that combine adolescent fantasies of wealth and celebrity with stable relationships with well-preserved fortysomething versions of their hot slutty dates from the eighties, still played by the same much younger actresses. Spare a thought for the audience, though, who are still stranded in the opening scene, where an old buddy catches up twenty years after that band you were in that used to be quite promising, and asks "What are you doing now?" before answering himself after a beat: "You're taking shit out of dogs' bottoms." It's the story of all our lives.



You could, of course, try telling kids the truth. "Lower your expectations. That's how you're going to be happy" is Dwayne Johnson's eminently grown-up counsel to a kid who asks his faded hockey-star hero how he can follow in his footsteps. Anywhere but in Hollywood, it would be sound therapeutic advice; but in the world of **Tooth Fairy**, eyes widen in shock as if he's just told him to lick his love pump, and Dwayne is sentenced by the fairies to seven days' hard labour under the pillows for "killing dreams" and "committing first-degree murder of fantasy". Dwayne protests: "The reason why there are so many unhappy people in the world is they're all clinging to fantasies of what-if." But there's no appeals process, and he has to serve out his running time in comedy fancy-dress wings with a strictly limited supply of one-shot Q devices from Billy Crystal as the annoying uncredited guest star. ("We're running very low on funding," explains Julie Andrews' executive Tinkerbell. It's because children aren't believing like they used to.") It's a pretty algorithmically-generated concept, taking *The Santa Clause* and merely nudging one of the dials a single notch, and a long chain of writers starting with Lowell Ganz & Babaloo Mandel have dismembered any sense that the faerie/dentition economy might once have made. Ashley Judd's single-mom romantic interest isn't much help: "You know what your problem is? You never say What If, and you never will... The person you hurt most with all your dream-killing is you." Yet she's the one who blurts out the tooth fairy's nonexistence in front of the same daughter whose faith Dwayne was originally sentenced for merely threatening. That's the fairy justice system for you.



The adult world is displaced entirely in Indian-animated **Space Chimps 2: Zartog Strikes Back**, a staggeringly inept 3D sequel to the 2008 kiddie hitlet about the astrophimate grandson of the Mercury programme's spam-in-a-can Ham, on a wormhole adventure to liberate a garish extrasolar Teletubbyland from Jeff Daniels' space tyrant Zartog with the aid of Kristin Chenoweth's throat-ticklingly cute lightbulb girl, and ending with Zartog exiled on Earth as a garden ornament. The audience for the original film skewed very young, something the sequel has embraced to the point of crushing asphyxiation. The lead role has devolved from Ham III and his crewmates to the junior tech runt from the first film, who gets axed from the followup mission but blasts off accidentally on autopilot without anyone in NASA particularly noticing. He then spends the middle of the film gambolling aimlessly around the attractions of planet Malgor in the company of the now recast Chenoweth character, and desperately trying to talk up a series of extremely low-rent 3D set pieces: "This is awesome! This is like the best roller coaster ever!" as they soar feebly above half-rendered clouds on a digidactyl, and "Faster! Faster!" as the camera frugally declines to follow. Unfortunately, in a daring violation of the laws of screenwriting, none of this is happening on the planet on which the actual plot is taking place, since Zartog is still stuck on Earth and such feeble striking back as he manages is set in the affordably grey and geometric spaces of mission control, with dialogue that seems to have been written by sleep-deprived typewriter-monkeys and cutaway gags that stop the pace dead in its tracks. NASA's mission plan talks darkly of terraforming, and seems to hint at a discarded plot on the lines of *Battle for Terra* in which the playschool utopia is threatened with colonisation and environmental atrocity, and the real villain is us. But like Patrick Warburton's character from the first film, the franchise has suffered comedy brain damage somewhere in re-entry, and forgotten where it was going by the time it gets there.



No such worries for **Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time**, which sets up a Jerry Bruckheimer swashbuckler franchise from scratch and then effectively erases the whole thing. Mike Newell's film is the first platform-game film of the parkour era, and transposes back to live action what modern platform first-persons have swiped back from cinema in their largely successful project to update the visual language of a form whose entire ludological grammar was born of, devised from, and optimised for primitive VGA graphics. But far more significant is the flirtation with a deeper dimension of game poetics. Unusually, the project began with a script from game creator Jordan Mechner himself, under the tutelage of screenwriting sensei John August; and like *Iron Man*, the film has cherry-picked the games' extensive canon for plot elements and characters, here sensibly fastening on the Dagger of Time MacGuffin with its power to rewind the plot to an earlier fork of the path. The mission then becomes a race against the counter-clock between Jake Gyllenhaal's Prince and, ahem, the secret villain visible from a distance of kiloparasangs to everyone but the characters, with each seeking to reboot the game continuity from a point that will give them control of the outcome. After a very long and exhausting display of non-stop early Sassanid stunt action ("Pulley! Now!") with dialogue hewn in cuneiform, we finally reach the climactic point where

almost everyone in the film is dead, the universe is about to be annihilated, and the antagonists struggle over a fiery pit with their hands on the game controller and their thumbs fighting to be first to press the button. It's then the oh-wow realisation hits you like a virtual frying pan Wiid at the back of your skull: *they're going to do multiple endings*. Because that, even more than first-person immersivity, is what games do: they let you replay the narrative over and over, dying and being reborn from different narrative junctures, and failing over and over till you succeed, just like in *Rogue Moon* (the sf novel that unknowingly invented the modern videogame). And so we rewind to an earlier scene, and brace for the moment when Jake gets killed again, then again, and again... The rules of the multiverse forbid spoiler discussion of what we actually get instead of this. Suffice to say that, should he simply succeed on the first attempt, it would not only throw away the most exciting idea a game adaptation has ever had about what its beleaguered genre can do to liberate film plotting, but would mean none of the cool stuff ever gets to happen, and Gemma Arterton's character in particular would be trapped in her old boring role as a passive object of romantic traffic, her incomparably more rewarding career as an action heroine snuffed out before it begins just like Princess Fiona's in *Shrek*. That couldn't happen, could it? Could it?

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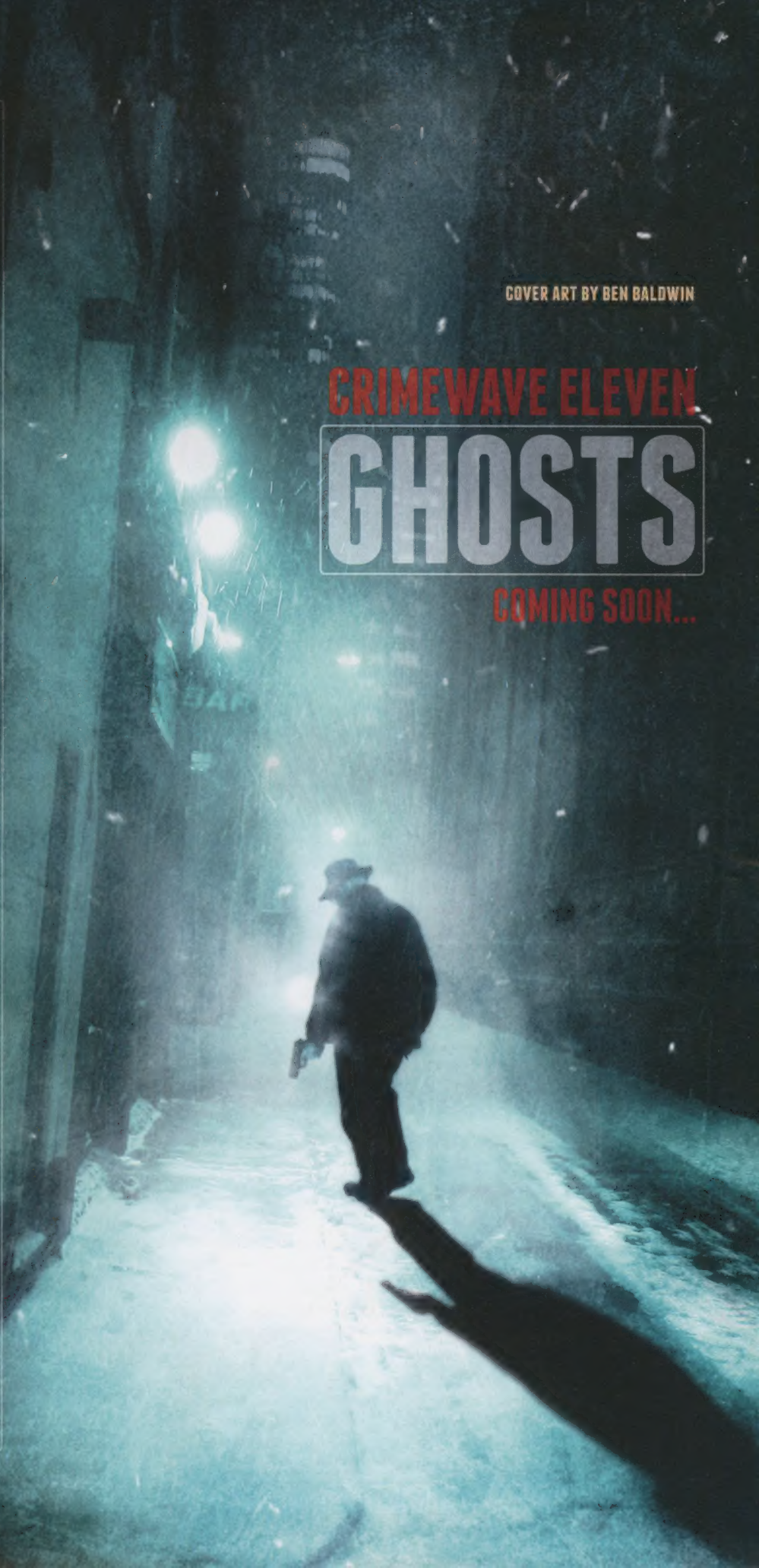
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COVER ART BY BEN BALDWIN

CRIMEWAVE ELEVEN GHOSTS

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GARY MCMAHON THE HARM OUT NOW!

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There were three of them then, Tyler, Roarke and Potter, and they were each eight years old: three young boys on the cusp, not yet aware of the darkness that lies at the heart of the world; children more at home with games and fantasy than hard reality. The day that fused these two states – when a nightmare became real life – changed them forever.

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